

SUPERMAN

(The unofficial novelization of
“Superman: The Movie”)

by
Solomon Grundy
<fearsolomongrundy@yahoo.com>

Chapter one

“Jor-El”

Life is rare in the universe. The right fluids have to swirl through the right gases while exposed to the perfect light in precise heat. Most planets never know the chemistry. They are too far from the sun or too close. Too much of one element, not enough of another. In some cases, if the swamps were only a few degrees warmer, something would be born. Instead wet rocks just roll in space around useless sparks.

Yet as rare as life is, scattered through the galaxies like a handful of sand strewn over a desert, it comes in great variety. Some life stays as amoebas, content to divide from one another, becoming millions and millions strong, without ever joining forces. Other times they merge and become larger organisms that slosh about in rivers and lakes and oceans. Sometimes they stop there, evolving no further, but if the atmosphere is suitable, the creatures may crawl, capturing the land in search of new nourishment. They may slither through the soil and the grass, or they may grow big and strong, climbing the trees or galloping over the plains. Other life rises up, looks around, and asks “What am I?” More questions follow, as it ponders its place: “Who am I?” and “Why am I?” It realizes its superiority to the groveling beasts. It binds with its like and together they build civilization. If wisdom ensues, they continue to ask questions, becoming more and more aware that the questions and their answers are without end.

These beings are *humanity*. The hardest form of life to find. Jor-El knew from experience. He had spent years scanning space for worlds like his own, sifting his fingers through the desert seeking out the fertile specks. In recent months, the search had become desperate. Time was running low. The quakes now came almost daily.

The CrystalMind had catalogued three worlds of varying development. Jor-El studied them closely. One intrigued him. Noisy broadcasts from the surface proclaimed the blue orb as “Earth”.

He passed his hand over the panel and the CrystalMind showed him a close-up section of the northern hemisphere. The machine classified it as “North America”. A slender hand caressed his arm. “What have you found?” his wife asked.

“A possibility, Lara,” he answered. “It’s already teeming. Perhaps a handful of us could go there, to some out of the way island where we won’t intrude.”

“The atmosphere could support us?”

“It should. The CrystalMind is running tests. We’ll know shortly.” He turned the operating crystal and the holographic map faded. He locked eyes with his mate, overcome by the fear in her gaze. “Don’t worry, Lara . . .”

“You’ve heard the gossip,” she said. “The council doesn’t believe you.”

“The vote is not until tomorrow.” He took her into his arms, hoping his caress would comfort in a way words could not.

“When they vote your proposition down, they’ll never allow you to leave. The council could never tolerate such dissension. They’d fear a panic among the people.”

Jor-El only nodded. His brilliant wife had thought the matter through to its unfortunate conclusion. There was no arguing against it.

“And if you don’t go,” she declared, “neither do I.”

He pushed her away, wanting to call her a fool and demand that she leave. But all he could do was grab her back again - oh, so much tighter.

As if sparked by their anguish, the child wailed from his nursery. “Go to Kal,” he said, his cheeks flushed. He looked to the crystalline wall, its deep amber hue showing that twilight was upon them. “Duty calls.”

Duty *always* called. Krypton demanded his all, and he freely gave it. The condition of his world always occupied his thoughts. Jor-El used every iota of his intellect to better his society and the planet it rested on. When he called it a day and powered down the CrystalMind interface, calculations still rattled away in the distant recesses of his brain - even during his most private moments. While he and Lara conceived their son, a part of him was determining the ramifications of the rising volcanic pressure in the planet’s core.

Yet, despite being Krypton’s chief scientist, his responsibilities did not end there. He was a member of the Ruling Council - the judges of the entire population. He was the gatekeeper of the Phantom Zone, the *executioner*, sending those deemed dangerous to a transdimensional pit. The Dome was darker than the blackest night. When Jor-El moved inward, a beam of white light shot up from the center of the floor, enveloping three motionless figures, trapped in place

by an undulating energy pen. A voice boomed: "You may proceed, Jor-El." The holographic face of Ro-Zan, owner of the voice and leader of the Council, shimmered into grand position high above the proceedings. The familiar features of the other council members quickly followed, forming a ring around Jor-El and the charged.

"You have reviewed the evidence. This is no fantasy. No careless product of wild imagination." He held forth a crystal on which was recorded the data of the trio's escapades, so extensive and complex that the CrystalMind had to grow the shard to the length of Jor-El's arm. "These indictments that I have brought to you today - their acts of treason, their ultimate aim of sedition - these are matters of fact. I ask you now to pronounce judgement on those accused." He gazed intently over the dark three. Black was the fashion, they in prison garb and he in the robe of the official. Tradition required that the clothing worn be as somber as the function itself. In the middle of the lightless Dome, the esthetic established an awesomeness, the prosecution rising out of the dark to face prisoners engulfed by an oppressive glare. But these were the proudest of the proud, and if the surroundings unnerved them, they did not let it show.

The least expressive was the biggest of them. Not because he was the most stoic. "Pass judgement on this mindless aberration, whose only means of expression are wanton violence and destruction," Jor-El continued. The big prisoner growled. Though not sure what was going on, he knew Jor-El was talking about him. His name was Non. He was the result of genetic tampering performed on a segment of the population a millennium before. The unintended result reared its ugly head every few generations, providing the world with a handful of evolutionary throw-backs. In an intellectual society as advanced as Krypton, such as Non were useless - except to the like of his companions. The great scientist pitied him, but Zod had trained him to destroy their society.

Jor-El directed the council's attention to the woman called Ursa. Her beauty could not hide the cold hatred bubbling beneath, forever threatening to burst free. "Her perversions and unreasoning hatred have threatened even the children of Krypton," the prosecutor charged. "The only feeling she has shown is for her vicious general. Her only wish is to serve at his side."

General Zod stood mutely, his vision fixed on the pulsating rim of the pen. Jor-El's footsteps drew near. The decommissioned-officer raised his head and locked eyes with his accuser. The small, slender man seemed, from a distance, a most unlikely candidate for tyrant. Perhaps more a librarian than a chieftain. Yet, his eyes held the fury, a tempest of hatred and arrogance caged behind cool irises. Jor-El raised his voice again: "Zod was once trusted by this council, charged with maintaining the defense of the planet. Yet he was the architect of this insidious plot to establish a new order among us - with himself as absolute ruler!"

Jor-El turned to the projected images of the jury. "The decision will now be heard."

One by one, without the slightest hesitation, declaring loudly with the rhythm of a drum, the council made their judgement: "Guilty! . . .Guilty! . . .Guilty! . . ."

With the rest of the council having spoken, Jor-El turned back to the trio, but before he could utter his pronouncement, Zod spoke. “The vote must be unanimous. It has become your decision. You alone will condemn us if you wish, and you alone will be held responsible by me.”

The prosecutor paused, his lips still slightly parted from Zod’s interruption. *How outrageous, Jor-El thought. He insists on being a king no matter how lowly his position. Right now he rules over a disk of light with the population of three. Look at the smug grin. The monster actually thinks I fear him!*

Holding up the evidence shard, Jor-El let Zod examine the full length of it. Then, he turned away, just catching the anxious change in Zod’s face.

“Join us. You have been known to disagree with the Council before. Yours could become an important voice in the New Order, second only to my own.”

The prosecutor walked, dissolving into the Dome.

“I offer you a chance for greatness, Jor-El. Take it!”

Jor-El felt his head shake in disgust.

Zod’s voice raised in volume and in rage, his indignance flushed away by hysteria. “You will bow down before me. I swear it.” *A rat*, Jor-El thought him, *cornered and hissing at predators*. “No matter that it take an eternity, you will bow down before me - both you, and then one day, your heirs!”

Jor-El never looked back. He heard the passage in the Dome wall slide open in the dark, and he stepped through, the door shutting again behind him. The light within the chamber slowly rose, allowing his sight to adjust. The CrystalMind interface glowed before him. Jor-El slid the damning shard into the machine and waited for a response. “The case and the judgement are recorded. The sentence has been determined,” spoke the CrystalMind, in the recognizable modulations of its creator, Jor-El. “Eternity in the Phantom Zone.”

The executioner confirmed the fact with a simple “Yes”.

“The portal is called. Do you wish to monitor transference?”

“I think not,” Jor-El responded, as he heard the hiss of the Dome rolling open. He had seen it enough. He knew very well what it looked like. Putting it out of his mind, he shed his robe and headed home. But when he stepped onto the busy commuter platform, a terrifying shriek shook the station and violently reminded him. Everyone getting on or off the gondolas, halted in their tracks, a wash of sobriety over their faces. The sound was known to everyone, trembling spines as well as walls.

The cry of the dragon.

Jor-El once discovered an anomaly along the orbit of the fourth planet. It proved to be a tear through time and space. Whatever was drawn through it was plunged into a void absent of any physical laws, a substanceless layer between dimensions. One can live in this “Phantom Zone”, but it was nothing more than breathing in a dream. “The Belly of the Beast”, Ro-Zan named it, recalling for his brethren the passage from the Writ of Rao: “They took the wicked down to the lair of the dragon and did satiate the beast’s hunger.”

“An ancient fable,” Jor-El argued.

“Or prophecy?” declared Go-Gan, one of the less scientifically-minded members of the tribunal.

“It is execution. We have not committed such an act since the days in which the Writ was put to parchment,” Jor-El said.

“You yourself have told us that time does not pass in the Zone, so the prisoners will not die,” asserted Go-Gan.

“But I cannot tell you that death is worse. I would find it hard to believe that it could be so,” responded their chief scientist.

Go-Gan was adamant. “For the good of the race of Krypton- -”

“You’re washing your hands of the blood!”

“We must have justice!”

Ro-Zan called for the vote. It was not the first vote Jor-El had lost.

On the Council’s edict, Jor-El became the beast’s master, snaring it by magnetic lariat from its celestial den. The dragon dives, sweeping down, blasting a fearsome cry as it tears through the atmosphere.

The commuters stood frozen, glaring upward as if they could see the attack through the twelve stories above. The shriek suddenly stopped and gave way to a quickly dissolving hum, sign that the dragon was soaring back to its orbiting den.

The crowd breathed a mutual sigh and went along their way, feeling fortunate they were not the meal and glad that the like of Zod were. Boarding a gondola, Jor-El sped down the tunnel. He made quick use of his seat’s head rest, closing his eyes and absorbing the soft whoosh as the car raced. He started piecing together the elements of his address for the next morning, scrawling it on the surface of his mind. *Start with the history of the quakes*, he thought, *then bring out the seismic readings*, then . . . *No. Display the charts first. Or . . . or it would be better to lead with the case studies. That will get their . . . attention better than . . . cold. . . facts . . .*

Soft and pink and full of spark, the infant coos and gurgles, slapping out at the mobile spinning over his cradle. The whirling colors lose his attention as his stomach sputters, demanding food.

His face reddens. His mouth stretches, wailing with the volume of a half dozen creatures his size. A pair of sleek hands reach in and lift him. “Are you hungry, Kal-El?” his mother says, bringing him to her breast. Rhythmic nursing settles his craving and his hands search for stimulation. Lara hands him a rattle. Wetly murmuring, Kal-El shakes the quartz plaything filled with rubies and sapphires. He shakes it and shakes it and shakes- -

The gondola jolted to a halt, awakening Jor-El in a lurch. He felt the rumble grow. This was not the fine tremor of the Phantom Zone anomaly, but something more terrifying: A quake emanating from the planet’s core - so powerful that no instruments were necessary to know that this was the worst yet.

“I am sorry,” spoke the gondola in a metallic voice. “We are experiencing technical difficulties due to a minor structural disturbance. Please, do not be alarmed. The system should re-set momentarily.”

The time was nearing faster than he had ever conceived. *Why?* he wondered. *When I should be using every synapse to save Krypton do I dream of home - of a wife who shall die with me, as well as a child who . . . ?* His mind drained, fixating on his boy. He thought about the tot’s name: Kal-El. “El” was the designation of a great clan. It meant “Of the stars”. The name he and Lara had chosen for him, “Kal”, meant “child”. Child of the stars. *Star Child*.

“Your journey will now resume.” the gondola said. Jor-El had not noticed the quake end.

Star child! He closed his eyes again and, with loving strokes, painted a portrait of his son on the black palate within: His arms reaching out, embracing the glittering universe, the Star Child lies nestled in the radiance of a starburst.

The scientist’s mind rocketed off in a new and acutely-aimed direction.

Jor-El shook his head, glaring at the holographic projection of his findings hovering in the middle of the Council chamber, illustrated with a model of Krypton’s orbit around their red-glowing sun. They halted him in mid-sentence, when Go-Gan abruptly called for a vote. Vond-Ah quickly seconded the motion. Then, with the same deliberate cadence as their declaration on Zod, the Council crushed Jor-El’s petition.

“You can’t ignore these facts!” Jor-El exclaimed. “It’s genocide!”

“Be warned,” Go-Gan said, smugly. “We have already evaluated this outlandish theory.”

“My friends,” Jor-El said, knowing right then what the core of Krypton felt like as he struggled to contain his swelling rage, “you know me to be neither rash nor impulsive. I am not given to wild, unsupported statements. I tell you we must evacuate this planet immediately.”

“You tell us that our beloved Krypton is turning on us,” Go-Gan argued, looking to Ro-Zan for approval. “It’s almost heresy.”

“Heresy?”

““Wrapped in the blanket of the cosmos, Rao loved the world, and, in that union, they did breed man and woman to walk--””

“Please!” Jor-El shot, disgusted that his adversary dared quote the Writ. “This is supposed to be a scientific forum.”

Taking the cue, Vond-Ah, her aged eyes full of patience, stepped between them. Jor-El sighed deeply, knowing her to be one of rational thought like himself. However, that did not mean that they always agreed, and judging by her vote, this was one of those instances. “It isn’t that we question your data,” she said. “The facts are undeniable. It’s your conclusion we find unsupportable.”

Jor-El pointed to his report floating translucent in midair. “This world will explode within thirty days!”

“Krypton, dear Jor-El,” Vond-Ah condescended, “is simply shifting its orbit. This has occurred three times in recorded history.”

“But look at my comparison of orbital fluctuations with seismic activity--” A hand on his shoulder stopped him. He turned to face the ancient features of Ro-Zan.

“Jor-El,” the Council leader groaned. “Be reasonable.”

“I have never been otherwise,” Jor-El responded. “There is a madness in this room and it is yours.”

Ro-Zan turned away. Jor-El went to the report. “Look here. During Summer we had three quakes felt from one pole to the other. If you look at the distortion in our orbit- -”

“This discussion is terminated!” Ro-Zan proclaimed. “The decision of the Council is final.”

It had been over before it started, Jor-El knew, but with Ro-Zan’s words came an air of *ultimate* finality. Go-Gan glided up beside the Council leader and whispered pointedly. Ro-Zan grimaced as he listened, yet when Go-Gan was done, he nodded. “Any attempt by you, Jor-El, to create a climate of fear and panic among the populace must be deemed an act of insurrection.”

The Ruling Council of Krypton had just branded Jor-El with the same iron as Zod. Could they not see the difference? “Has it become a crime to cherish life?” he asked.

“You would suffer banishment to your own Phantom Zone,” Go-Gan warned.

“Cast me out with the murderers and would-be tyrants?” Jor-El questioned. He examined his eleven judges: *Who are the real tyrants?*

“We must keep the peace,” Ro-Zan said.

“I see,” Jor-El acknowledged. *Keep the masses at rest by maintaining their ignorance. Tyrants all!*

“Will you abide by our decision?” Ro-Zan asked.

Squaring his shoulders and standing as stately as he could, Jor-El replied. “I will remain silent.”

“Your silence is not enough,” Go-Gan snapped.

“You wish to disarm me,” Jor-El countered. “My voice is my only weapon.”

“Not so,” Go-Gan scoffed. “You’re a famous and respected man- -”

“Really?” interrupted the chief scientist, his bitterness subtle. “Not among my peers, it seems.”

“Your actions impact all. Should you choose to abandon us and Mother Krypton, the result will be hysteria.”

“Go-Gan is right,” Ro-Zan said. “The House of El is much scrutinized.”

Jor-El gazed down at the insignia decorating his jacket breast and ran an unconscious finger along the black swirling symbol of life unending. The meaning of his family crest he tried to hold close to his heart, not just in his apparel, but in his philosophy.

“As for your brother . . .” the Council leader continued.

Have these people no decency. I’ve known most of them all my life yet they stand around me as a band of the coldest bandits, robbing me and my family of our dignity. “Zor-El has assured me,” Jor-El insisted, “that under no circumstances will he and his wife, Alura, leave Argo City.”

“And you and Lara . . .”

“Neither my wife nor I will attempt to leave Krypton.”

Ro-Zan heavily nodded as he looked to each of his fellows. They responded in kind. *The Council is satisfied. . .the Council is finally satisfied! Just short of stripping me naked.* Silently, his judges went their way, leaving Jor-El with his thoughts. Intense thoughts.

He scanned the holographic report one last time, focusing on the green orb of Krypton. He had loved it with all his being - cared for it every moment of his adult life. As a husband he was

lacking, so too as a father. He had given the world his all. Without his planet, he would not have known how to define himself. That is, until now. Now in the face of oblivion.

Everything you have demanded, Krypton, I have given. Without question. Without complaint. You even require my life and I give. My beloved Lara, as well. But you ask too much. Too much! You will not take my son!

He went to the interface, shut off the projection, and commanded the CrystalMind to recycle the shard.

“How is the starship coming?” Jor-El asked.

“The vessel should be complete in six days,” the crystalline-entity answered.

“I have another task for you: Calculate how long it will take to grow shards for external storage of all topics in your library labeled by me as ‘essential knowledge’.”

“Shall I round off the figure to the nearest year?”

“Nevermind.”

Jor-El knew it was strange that he felt it necessary to explain to the CrystalMind what he was about to do. Its sentience was an illusion, aware of its own existence only because Jor-El said it was so. It had no thought, no voice, except as it recalled the intellect of its creator. It was a device - a massive, complex gadget - but one built with great paternal care, holding a place in his life that should have been reserved for others. He misplaced his affection, confusing the labor of his hand and mind with that which should come from his heart, yet he could not ignore the sense of responsibility. He owed it something. Today, the CrystalMind would become a part of the future. “You’re going to be the link between Kal-El and me. Everything that makes me who I am you will carry to him. You will be the spirit of my intellect, my wisdom, and my love.”

The CrystalMind hummed, unable to convert his master’s explanation into an understandable equation.

The scientist went to the core of the city where the body of the CrystalMind was housed, rooted directly to the city’s power. He opened the casing and, shard by shard, removed the machine’s memory.

The walls shook for the third time that day. The core-sensors were clear, Jor-El had been generous. The planet would never see thirty days. Only ten had past since his declaration and Krypton was not likely to see the dawn of an eleventh.

Jor-El left just enough of the CrystalMind to run the world's basic functions and to finish his desperate work. Glowing power throbbed through the translucent conduits of his workshop, feeding the completed ship. The vessel sat glimmering in the center of the room, the silvery spines jutting out in every direction from its spherical hull. Divided through its equator, the craft's upper hemisphere was raised high above by an anti-gravitational field, so that its designer could reach in and program the on-board computer below. Carefully, he inserted each of the CrystalMind's shards into the craft.

"Have you finished?" spoke Lara, rounding a conduit as she entered. She stepped through the spines and looked down at the berth. Worry wrenched her face. "Will he be . . . comfortable?"

"He'll be fine." The last of the CrystalMind's memory was in place. "It's the only answer, Lara. If he stays- -"

She did not need to hear it. "I know."

A chime sounded. Jor-El went to the southern wall as it glowed and an image formed on its surface. The aged woman's features appeared a hundred years older than the last time he had seen her in the Council chamber. "Vond-Ah," he acknowledged.

"My . . . my own readings of the core activity," she said, her voice trembling, "confirm your . . . uh, theory." She shook her head with a regretful and ironic laugh. "Well, its more than a theory, isn't it?"

Jor-El shifted on his feet, impatiently. "If you'll excuse me. I'm very busy."

"Please, Jor-El," Vond-Ah said. "I just wanted . . . on behalf of myself and the Council . . . to apologize to you. Obviously, you were the wisest of- -"

"Thank you for calling, Vond-Ah. Again I- -"

"Go-Gan is dead!" she broke in, anxiously. "He has killed himself. It seems he could not bear the thought that Mother Krypton was dooming us."

Jor-El sagged. The devastation had taken its first victim. "I'm sorry to hear it."

"You see . . ." Tears welling in her eyes, Vond-Ah raised fragile fingers to quivering lips. ". . . we thought you were being unfaithful to Rao . . ."

"I was never unfaithful to Rao," Jor-El said, trying to control the violent mix of anger and grief boiling in his breast. "My research just made me understand him more."

His colleague nodded. "Our remaining ten invite you to join us in the chamber for the end. Your strength is greatly desired."

"I'm sure you'll understand when I say that I'd prefer to be with my family."

“Of . . .of course.” No more restraint. Her tears burst.

Shamed, Jor-El stood straight and held out his right palm. This was no time for righteousness. *Do we not all deserve to die with at least some respect?* “Go with Rao.”

With a deep breath, the woman gathered herself and returned the gesture. “And you.”

The image dissolved and Lara came to her husband, caressing his hand and kissing him lightly. “You’ve been vindicated, my love.”

“What good has pride done us?” he said. “All that matters is that we see Kal-El on his way. Bundle him up snugly and we’ll put him aboard.”

His wife stood still, exchanging glances from Jor-El to the path that led to the nursery.

“Please, Lara, quickly.”

“I don’t know if I can bear this.”

“If he remains here he will die as surely as we will.”

“But why Earth? I’ve seen your scans. They’re primitives.”

“He will need that advantage to survive.”

“They will think him odd . . .they will fear him.”

“He’ll look like one of them.”

“He won’t *be* one of them. He’ll be isolated . . . alone.” Lara sighed, as her husband walked to the CrystalMind interface and took from it another shard, very different from the others. The others were perfectly clear. This was a deep green. Lara had never seen anything like it.

“He will not be alone,” Jor-El said, his voice molded by fatherly love. “He will never be alone.” Carefully, more so than with any other aspect of the ship’s construction, he placed the green shard into the on-board computer. When he arose, he saw Lara coming from the nursery with their child wrapped in the blankets from his bed.

“He’s so small,” she wept.

He took the quiet infant and, with a kiss, rested him in the berth. Gazing down he saw the fruition of his goal, his son nestled in the radiance of a starburst. Kal-El, the Star-Child!

“You will travel far, my little one,” he said, gripping a small, restless hand with a pinch. “But I will never leave you. Even in the face of my death, the richness of my life shall be yours. All that I have learned, everything I feel, all of this and more I bequeath you.”

The room bucked. The couple lunged as the walls cracked. A high-pitched cry blasted from the interface, signaling that the core had finally ruptured. In only minutes, the planet would begin breaking apart.

With his arm tightly holding his wife, he leaned in closer to Kal-El, who gurgled and played thinking the fury nothing more than the rocking of his cradle. “You shall carry me inside you all of your days. You will make my strength your own, see my life through your eyes, as your life will be seen through mine.”

Words are valuable things. They can pass on burdens, lighten loads, convey troubles, and , when a heart bursts with love, they may bestow blessings. As Jor-El lowered the upper hemisphere, sealing the ship shut around the child, he knew he had given his son everything he had to give: His soul, his mind, and his final, revealing words.

The starship rose, the room around it shaking more and more. The ceiling was already crumbling as it crashed through the skylight.

The mother wetted her fingertips with a kiss and aimed them at the night sky toward the white point that was her son. The father held his wife and gazed upward, his face awash with satisfaction, defying the violence around them. *Funny, isn't it?* he thought. *While my planet breaks into bits . . . I've never been so whole.*

Chapter Two

“Ma and Pa”

As the old truck rumbled down the highway, her hands lay folded reverently in her lap, an unconscious remnant of Sunday morning services. While the choir quietly harmonized through the benediction, Martha bowed her head and muttered the same earnest petition that she placed before God each Sabbath.

“Dearest Lord . . . Blessed Savior . . .”

The tradition was eighteen years old. It started twelve months after her father walked her down the aisle of the First Baptist Church to wed her beloved Jonathan. She was so eager to start her family that she was already frustrated that there were yet no stirrings.

“ . . . You have given us so much love that it over flows our hearts . . . ”

At once a week, the prayers were fervent. They lingered passionately in the deepest part of her mind even as she and Jonathan bid their farewells to the congregation, ate their sandwiches at the diner, and drove the hour and a quarter trip to the farm.

“ . . . I beg of you to allow us to share that abundance with another of your blessed creatures . . . ”

In fact, Martha could not have said, even if she thought about it - and she tried not to - how long the prayers would tarry. Perhaps they were just winding down come each Sunday morning.

“ . . please, God, give us a child!”

The man in the driver’s seat shot her a quick smile and a wink, then looking back to the road, began whistling up a snappy rendition of “Just As I Am.” Martha smiled back and swatted Jonathan’s knee. With the years, little things meant so much: A wink meant “We’ll be home pretty soon” and “I’ll get around to fixin’ that cabinet door” and “You’re still the most beautiful woman I ever laid eyes on.” A smack on the knee meant “It’s great ridin’ with you” and “I’ve patched your favorite shirt” and “You ain’t too bad lookin’ yourself.” There was no question about it. God would not have bound a pair so snugly without a reason. So, Martha’s prayers were never wrought with pity or anger. It was just a matter of faith - just a matter of time before He saw fit to answer her prayer.

“What the heck!” Jonathan barked, the truck jarring as if hit by lightning. A blinding blaze sprayed through the windshield as an ear-shattering roar blasted overhead. He wrangled with the steering-wheel. The tires squealed and the truck spun to a stop.

The dust from the road billowed up, the truck shuddering to stillness. “Are you all right, sweetie?” he asked. Martha nodded and the couple got out, each of them gasping to replace the air so mercilessly yanked from their lungs.

“Jonathan!” Martha exclaimed, unable to believe what she saw.

“What?” her husband responded, stepping up beside her and looking at what gripped her so.
“Holy Cow!”

Cut through the freshly-planted field was a scorched trench. It was at least fifty yards long. Near the edge of the road, the blackened groove started narrow, only a handspan, and expanded as it went, until ending in a crater about twelve feet across, smoke rising from the molten object that rested there.

“Is . . .is that. . .” Martha stammered, “what I think it is?”

“By gum,” her husband replied, “I’ve read enough of those Amazing Stories to know a *meteorite* when I see one.”

Threatening to walk into the field, Martha stepped in closer to get a better look.

Jonathan snatched her elbow. “Where do y’ think you’re goin’?”

The smoke was dissolving and, over the top of the meteor, she saw something move. “Look.”

He saw it, too. "Is that an animal? Did it get hit?"

"What if it's a person," she said, desperately. "We have to help 'im!"

They looked up and down the highway. Not a soul was in sight. "Right," he answered, and took the step down into the field.

Martha stuck out her hand for assistance. "I'm comin', too."

"Now, Martha, there's no need -"

"I am comin'," she said in a tone Jonathan knew well. *And better never forget!* she thought.

"All right," he surrendered. "Just like the minister said, 'Til death us do part' . . . so here goes!" He helped her down and they slowly eased through the field, keeping a safe distance even as they rounded the meteorite.

The smoke had completely disappeared and the couple could make out the object easily. Martha thought it looked like a rock - what else could it be? It had cracked open, exposing a glittering center, like it was full of pale blue diamonds lit by flickering Christmas lights. Later, her husband would tell her it reminded him of those thundereggs at Yellowstone that the souvenir store had cut open and polished. "Yep," she agreed. "That's exactly what it looked like." But, at that moment, neither Martha nor Jonathan was terribly concerned with how decorative the thing was. What was *playing* along the edge of the crater captured their attention.

"Land o'Goshen!" Martha exclaimed.

The most adorable little boy she had ever seen crawled up out of the hole. His piercing blue eyes looked up from a perfectly-featured face that beamed with a smile as big as the whole county. The boy was stark naked, not a stitch on, his alabaster skin glowing in the afternoon sun.

The poor thing can't be more than two, maybe three years old. Where on Earth has he come from? Martha wondered. She and Jonathan exchanged ignorant glances.

The boy raised his arms to her. *My Goodness!* The oddness of the event just washed away. With a gulp of motherly adoration, she swept him up in her arms.

Her diligence was rewarded. God had answered her pleas with a boldness that defied her imagination. She knew He would provide, but never expected an angel straight from heaven. She laughed in wordless joy. *Thank you, Lord!*

"How did he get out here?" Jonathan questioned, scratching at one ear. "Necked as the day he was born and not a scratch on 'im?"

"He's a gift," she said, bouncing the child in her arms.

“Martha, you’re not sayin’ . . .” Jonathan grunted in disbelief.

“Look at his beautiful wrapping,” she said, pointing to the brightly-colored blankets strewn in the glowing well of the meteorite.

Jonathan jumped down, carefully retrieved the swatches of red, yellow, and blue, and handed them up to his wife. He slowly reached out to the boulder and laid his calloused palm on the dark outer crust. The radiance within was dimming. “Amazin’,” he said. “It’s already cool.”

He looked up at Martha as she set the child down and lovingly draped the toddler in one of the blankets. Her husband’s face was filled with concern. She could see he was troubled. It’s not that he did not have faith. She knew he was as earnest a Christian as any New Testament apostle. But he was a farmer - a man of the earth through and through. His life was tilling the soil and harvesting the crops. His world was what he felt in his hands and made through the sweat of his brow. Gifts of children from heaven just did not happen! “The first thing we gotta do when we get home,” Jonathan said, frankly, “is find out who that boy’s proper family is.”

“He hasn’t got any,” she argued. “Not around here anyway.”

“He’s not ours to keep.”

“We could say he’s the child of my cousin in North Dakota and just now orphaned.” Martha was being as manipulatively sweet as she could be, but all she was getting in return was head shaking. “Don’t tell me you haven’t been wanting a child just as much- -”

Suddenly, the boy sprang into the crater. “Whoa!” Jonathan yelled, as the child landed in his arms. “What a grasshopper he is!” He laughed in surprise and the boy joined in. Martha laughed, too. She could see that each of the toddler’s giggles squeezed at the farmer’s heart. Jonathan’s leathery cheeks flushed and the look in his eyes told her that the boy had found a father. “Blessed be!” she cheered.

“Growin’ up on the farm I knew better than to think storks brought babies,” Jonathan blubbered. “But today I sure as heck believe in shootin’ stars!”

Putting the boy down next to him, he took out his handkerchief and wiped away the tears that glutted his eyes. He cleared his throat and tried to find the voice of practicality that the community knew him for. “Alright . . . alright, folk are gonna see this spacerock and start snoopin’ around. I’m afraid somebody. . .that is, somebody without the sense to know children don’t plummet from the sky . . .might just connect it with the boy here and --”

“Clark!” Martha chimed. She had been storing that name for a long time. Proud of her family, she was eager to have their son called by her maiden name.

“Clark Kent, it is,” Jonathan said, shooting the boy a wink.

He gave the boulder a long, serious examination. “We’re gonna have ta do somethin’ with this.” He put his hands and chest firmly against the rock and pushed.

“For crying out loud, take it easy, Jonathan,” Martha warned. “You know what Doc Frye said about that heart of yours.”

“You manage ta keep remindin’ me,” he grumbled. “I’m just tryin’ to get an idea how heavy it is. Gotta be a thousand pounds if it’s an ounce.”

“What’ll we do?”

He wiped his brow with his handkerchief and thought heavily. “Well. . .we give ol’ Ben Hubbard a call. I know we can trust ‘im. And if we get the tractor, he and I can- - What the heck!”

He heard the ground crackling at his feet. The meteorite was moving. He jumped out of the way as his wife called out: “Mind your feet, Jonathan!” She saw what was making the boulder roll. Little Clark, never losing his big smile, was pushing it with the ease of opening a door. *Lord Almighty, how mysterious are your ways!* she prayed.

“What’ll we do about this?” Jonathan asked his wife.

“What’s to be done?” She pointed the way to the truck and said to the boy: “That a-way, son.”

Football! He loved it. The strategy. The camaraderie. The excitement. It all seemed like so much fun.

Yes, *seemed*. He did not play. Not because he did not know how. Clark had memorized the rule book right down to the most obscure subsection.

It was not because he was not allowed. The coach took one look at the tall freshman and insisted that he try-out. But, respectfully, the boy declined.

Definitely it was not because he did not *want* to play. He dreamt about it! There was nothing like the sight of that pig-skin spiraling through the air, and, as far as he was concerned, those one hundred yards between the shiny white goal-posts was the Land of Milk and Honey!

Yet, there was one insurmountable problem, one element of the game that stymied his desire: If he played, it would not be fair. Not fair at all.

The team rushed up. Only a few of them said anything: “Here ya go!”, “Hey!”, and something that sounded like “Klinuht”. They plopped down their helmets, shoulderpads, and sweat-drenched jerseys and took off. Clark started organizing the equipment along the team bench.

“Let’s have those uniforms washed and ready for Friday’s big game,” the assistant coach said as he darted past.

Truth be told, Clark realized they would not want him on the team. Who would want to play alongside a guy who can make a touchdown on every play? They would learn to hate him, and who would blame them?

And what about the opposition? Not only would they feel useless playing against a team with an invincible player - a Goliath - but, if they truly knew of what he was capable, they would be scared to death. If Clark slipped up, forgot himself for just a moment, the result could be lethal.

I gotta be the only one in this world who hasta think about football as an ethical dilemma.

So, he did not play. He participated on the side-line, taking care of the equipment and passing out the water. *Somebody has to do it*, he told himself. And he was determined to be the best Team Manager, a.k.a. waterboy, the Smallville High Pioneers ever had! From his station at the bench, he could hear the grunts, see the scrimmages, and smell the sweat. An acuteness of senses unlike that of anyone else allowed him to distinctly envision his own position on the line. Yet, as an imaginary player he had no impact, and it could be frustrating - oh, so frustrating - to watch his classmates struggle with what would come to him so easily.

Clark always sighed heavily with the thought: *So easily!*

“Dang it!”

Looking up from his work, Clark saw a cheerleader stumble and drop an armful of pom-poms as she charged across the field. The pep squad’s practice had just broken up, and sweet Lana Lang had gotten stuck lugging them away. Clark smiled - and smiled big. There was more than just the love of football that brought him to the field, and that was this girl, whose head seemed afire when the sunlight glanced off her tousled strawberry-blond hair.

He set down the last folded jersey and dashed over to her, grabbing up the pom-poms. “Don’t bother with these, Lana. I got ‘em.”

“Thank you, Clark,” she replied with a smile as big as his own. *Is it as sincere?*

“It’s no problem.” He could feel his cheeks warm. “I gotta take that other stuff anyway.”

“You know, I think your the nicest boy in school,” she said, crinkling her freckled nose.

Am I crazy? Or is she blushing, too. “Uh . . . thanks.”

“Come on, Lana, let’s go!” the other cheerleaders called out from the parking lot, as they piled into a convertible with some football players. She waved at them, letting the girls know she was coming.

“Say, Clark,” she said stepping in close, “we’re all going up to Mary Ellen’s to listen to some records . . . Would you like to come?”

Wow! I’ve been sweet on her since as far back as I can remember. I always knew she thought I was okay, but . . . is it possible that she’s kinda sweet on me, too? This was his chance to find out, to get to know the girl he had been dreaming about from all the way back in grade school. A whole lifetime raced over his mind like a track-and-field event: A lifetime filled with Saturday night dates, cuddly hayrides, a Sunday morning wedding, and years of popping out babies. Every detail neat and normal. Too normal, he knew. But as a fifteen-year old boy, he had a right to indulge his fantasies. *Don’t I?* he asked himself. He answered the girl with a resounding “Sure!”

“Kent can’t make it,” trumpeted a smug voice. “He’s got a lotta work to do.” The tall, blond quarterback swaggered up. His name was Brad and he had an ego that overflowed the football field and spilled all over the school. He thought the ability to throw passes with pinpoint accuracy made him “God’s Gift to Women.” A few cheerleaders, with their giggling and curl-twisting, were happy to encourage the impression. Lana was not one of them, and Clark knew that Brad was eager to rectify that.

“Whatya talkin’ about, Brad?” Clark said, pointing toward the bench. “I’m almost fin- -” Clark frowned. The bench was overturned and the results of his work were now scattered down the sideline.

“Oh, Brad!” Lana said, with disgust. The quarterback hooked her with an arm and pulled her away. “Let’s go.”

“Come on, guys!” the kids from the convertible shouted.

“I’ll see ya later, Clark,” Lana said. There was sorrow in her voice.

Popularity has its own disadvantages, Clark concluded.

“Clean that up, Kent!” Brad jabbed, as he put Lana in the car next to him. They drove off.

A few minutes later, everyone gone, Clark began picking up Brad’s mess. He did it quickly - far more quickly than if anyone had been watching - and, in seconds, the jerseys were folded and the helmets and shoulderpads were stacked. Just as he was about to begin carrying the equipment to the locker room, he caught sight of the last stray remnant of the practice - the football itself, lying near the fifty-yard line. He picked it up, handling it gently as if it were a blessed thing - rolling it around in his hands, and feeling the smoothness of the leather and the bumps of the laces. He wished Brad were there to see this: Holding it waist high, he dropped the ball and punted, his toe sending it skyward.

To this day, the people of Ludwick murmur about the object that burst through Old Man Fenton’s barn. Some in town say it was a “ruskie bomb” that failed to explode; Others say it was an eagle blinded in a sandstorm; Others still insist that it was a *football* from God knows where! The

latter, of course, is always discussed with a particular hush. “What jackass came up with that,” they whisper. Yet, most folk do not believe the story at all. Just garbage. It is no more worth their time than Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, or that mysterious crash in the field outside a little town called Smallville, two hundred miles away.

The first time he took off on a long run like this Clark left a long gouge in the dirt road. But now, after dozens of such runs, he barely even kicked up dust, almost as if he were no longer touching the ground. *I'm really gettin' light on my feet*, he figured.

He plotted out this route the first week of school. Though adding almost three miles to his trip home, it was off the beaten path and he felt secure that he would go unseen. That is, except for an engineer or two driving the cargo trains that run alongside old Miller road. *But they have better things to do than ogle some kid racing beside them*, Clark reasoned, *even if he's keeping pace with the train!*

His wake shivered the leaves of the bushes as he ripped by, his legs blurring under him.

Freedom!

His energy rushing, he was not Clark, the kid who had to fit in, who had to restrain himself every moment of the day. Who was he when he ran like this? He had no clue. But he was not Clark, that was for sure.

Rounding the bend onto Miller Road, he saw a locomotive charging away up ahead. He picked up speed. *Oh! A passenger train. Well, so what if some strangers see me? It's not like I'm ever goin' to run into any of 'em again.* In a second he was in line with the last car, a second later he was midway up the train. He looked over to the windows. Everyone was busy reading or talking, except one girl - she might have been eleven or twelve - glaring out at him, her eyes wide with amazement. He laughed as the child tried frantically to alert the woman sitting next to her. The woman would not be bothered. Pouting, the girl dipped back down into her seat.

Surging, he overtook the train. As Miller road and the track intersected with Hawkins Pass, he turned, and shot in front of the racing engine, missing it by inches. He stopped and watched it go by. “A regular Mercury,” he declared himself, then rocketed up Hawkins Pass.

His plan was working out perfectly. As he turned with a skid onto Mercer Way, he could see the dust plume rising beyond the hill and coming at him on the slender road that separated two stretches of land - the Kent place and two hundred acres of corporately-owned lima beans. His unaware opponents, singing along with Ricky Nelson blaring over the car radio, were, despite Brad's notorious lead foot, going much too slow.

He had more than ten seconds quietly to gloat before the convertible screeched to a halt before

the Kent house drive. “Kent!” the football star barked, leaping up onto his seat. “How the heck did you get here?”

Leaning against a fence post, his face smeared with unrestrained pride, Brad’s adversary did not much resemble the wimp the athlete had left back at the school. “I ran,” he said, his voice distinctly lower than what his classmates were used to.

“Ran?” Lana chirped. She was smiling, happy to see him cut Brad down a notch. Yet something else glossed over her eyes. To one extent or another it tainted the expressions of the other kids, too - especially Brad. *Could it be . . .* His brow creased as he thought it . . . *fear?*

“Come on, guys,” Brad said, dropping back behind the wheel. “I told you he was an oddball!”

Lana waved as the car took off again, her smile dimming, leaving only the disquiet.

“Been showin’ off a bit, haven’t ya, son?”

The raspy voice startled him. He saw his Pa’s head peer up over the broken down tractor stalled at the edge of the drive.

The boy deflated as he saw the pooling disappointment in Jonathan Kent’s eyes. Swollen vanity fled him like air escaping a pricked balloon. Whoever that magically-powered person was before, Pa had sent him away with a glance. “I didn’t mean to show off, Pa,” Clark said, strolling up to him as the old man dropped his wrench in the tool box.

“You gotta be careful,” Pa said, wiping grease off his calloused hands with a rag.

“I know. It’s just guys like that Brad, I just wanna . . .”

“You just wanna *what?*”

Clark stared down at his shuffling feet. “I just wanna . . . tear them apart.”

The old man sighed as he put his arm around his boy’s shoulders. They headed up the drive toward the house. “I see.”

“You understand what I mean, don’t ya?”

“Yeah, I do, Clark. But there’s a difference between me and anybody else toyin’ with that sorta petty anger . . . and you doin’ it. Your Ma and I have been pretty hard on ya about this, but ‘With great power--’ .”

“‘Comes great responsibility.’ I haven’t forgotten. But, Pa, if he and all of ‘em could see me on the field . . .”.

“Yep. You can do all these amazing things, and you think you’ll go bust if you can’t

show people, right?”

“Right. You shoulda seen me comin’ home. I beat the afternoon express to Hawkins Pass.”

“Since the day we found ya, I’ve seen ya do many things one can only call miraculous. You don’t have to sell me or your Ma.”

“Is it wrong, Pa, really? Is it wrong to do the things you’re capable of doin’? Is a bird showin’ off when it flies?”

“No. But I know God doesn’t give gifts frivolously. He has plans for us all based on what he’s granted us. I truly believe that. And, boy, he’s given to you in such wealth that, as sure as Spring follows Winter, he’s got a purpose for you that’ll astound everybody. I couldn’t begin to tell ya what it is, how he wants you to use your gifts . . . but I do know they’re not for out-racin’ trains or- -”

“Or makin’ touchdowns,” Clark smiled broadly at his Pa. “I understand.”

“And take it easy jumpin’ back-and-forth over the barn . . .” The old man mussed his son’s hair with a laugh, as they stepped up onto the porch. “They can see ya from the highway.”

Clark’s mother saw them coming and stepped out into the doorway. “I got some fresh-made lemonade, fellas.”

“That’d sure hit the spot, darlin’,” Pa said, sitting in one of the twin wicker chairs set up for visiting on such warm days. “How about you, son?”

“Nah,” Clark replied. “I’m not thirsty.”

“Course you’re not,” Pa said, with a wink. “Outrun a locomotive - why wouldya be thirsty?”

Ma shouted with alarm: “You did what, Clark?”

“Don’t worry, Martha,” her husband answered, slumping in his seat. “I’ve been over it with ‘im.”

With a hesitant nod, Clark’s mother dipped back into the house. From the pasture, beyond the barn, a dog started excitedly to yelp. Only the boy could hear him.

“Jib’s callin’ me, Pa,” Clark said. He turned to go.

His father grabbed him by the arm. “Son . . .” Jonathan Kent was always a man of depth, a man who thought long and carefully on matters of life and discussed them earnestly. Yet, as the man’s fingers gripped his son’s forearm, his graveness whipped a mystifying chill in the boy.

“Whatever you do . . . Whatever you become, remember, always keep *Clark* in your heart.”

The boy lovingly squeezed the hand that held him. “Sure, Pa. I’m always gonna be Jonathan

and Martha's kid."

A small grin creased the man's face. "Sure . . ." He stretched, gave a big yawn, and rested his head back. "Don't keep Ol' Jib a-waitin'."

Clark leapt from the porch and ran off past the barn to catch the old Border Collie.

Always keep Clark in your heart.

The thought took him back to that feeling he had racing the train. For those minutes, he did not think of himself as Clark Kent. The name was too bland for him, and the fact exhilarated him. Now he was scared. *Who is Clark? And if I become someone else who would I be? What would I be?*

Ma and Pa told him he was strong and fast right from the moment they found him. His strength and agility grew as he matured. Near his eleventh birthday, heightened senses began to emerge: From school, he could smell Ma's special apple cake baking. He could feel the rumble of the train through the tracks while it was still twenty miles away. Not only could he see distances with amazing detail, but occasionally, he thought he peered through solid objects. The depth of his hearing struck him most. Out one morning feeding the chickens, a harsh buzzing around his head bothered him. He swat at the unseen swarm three times before he realized there were no insects to be struck. He followed the sound out of the chicken pen, past the barn, around the house, and through the wheat field. In the hollow of an old oak tree, he found a hornet's nest crowded with buzzing life.

Then he heard everything: the breeze rustling the wheat, the scurry of the ants through the grass, the constant arguing of a pair of lima bean-pickers. Maddening! After a few frustrating days he went back to the hive, and there he learned. He listened closely and gradually heard the unique voice of each hornet, a hum so individual it was as if each sang its own composition in a grand chorus. He took this lesson with him to the rest of the world. He mastered a universe of sound. "I hope Ben got his truck fixed," Pa wondered aloud one morning at breakfast. Little Clark listened and heard Ben Hubbard's truck wheezing as he struggled with the ignition. "Sounds like he's gonna be late again, Pa," the boy said and turned back to the funnies in the morning paper, oblivious to everything else.

Yet, sounds were not there just because he failed to listen for them. Everyday noises bounced about comfortably in the back of his mind. Sounds of home. A pair of rhythms, in particular - persistent drummings - providing a sense of warmth and stability. His subconscious kept a constant tab on them. They represented so much. He needed the two beats, just as he needed their sources.

One of the duet, a sound among hundreds, ceased. A silence exploded in his mind.

"Pa!"

Clark roared back to the house, cracking the porch stairs as he came to a halt.

Jonathan Kent was so still his chair seemed to move.

Clark knelt beside him and grasped his hand. He felt immediately what he had already heard. He wrapped his mighty arms around him - what was left of him - and silently plead to the Creator to return the old man's spirit.

The screen door creaked, and the boy looked up to see his mother, her face gnarled in horror. A glass of lemonade slipped from her fingers and crashed at her feet. She dropped next to the boy, and he begged her for the sort of counsel only the old man could give. "Ma, all these powers . . . what good are they when I can't even save the greatest man I've ever known?"

She answered only with tears.

Chapter Three

"Kal-El"

He never raced the train again. Clark took the short way back and forth from school and walked it slowly.

He never did play football. In fact, he gave up being the team manager and never got near the field again.

He avoided any situation where he might seem extraordinary, might be tempted to show himself as something special. Wrapping himself in academics, he worked on the school paper, joined the science club, and became treasurer of 4H, all of which the senior year annual has listed beneath his name. A photograph is oddly missing. In these endeavors he found it easy to sit in the background, to contribute, but no more than others. He could solve an equation or compose an article fifty times faster than anyone else. But if he did not hand in the result until everyone else was up to speed, who knew the difference?

Sometime after Jonathan Kent's passing, he lost sight of the future. Without Pa, the purpose that the old man promised withered away, leaving Clark trapped by the farm, the school, and the stretch of road between. Once graduation had come and gone, his prison shrunk to their acres of wheat and barley, with an occasional reprieve to go into town for supplies.

On one trip he found that Lana had gone to work behind the counter at the General Store. Clark and Lana's eyes met as she boxed up his order. The fear was still there. After three years, it was *still there*. She tried to be sweet. "Hi there, Clark," she said. "It's been a long time since we

talked. You shouldn't be such a stranger." Her look made it clear - she wanted him around like she wanted a tick drilling her skin. He drove back to the farm, found Ben, and said: "How about if I slop the pigs and you do the shoppin'?"

"Sure, I guess," Ben answered, confused. "But . . . y'gotta slop the hogs every day and the trip into town is only once a week."

"So?"

"It just don't seem like it'd be fair to ya, is all."

"It's my idea, isn't it?"

"Whatever ya say, boss."

Clark went through each day the same, sluggish way. On the farm, drudging through his chores, out of sight of anyone else, he would go through his day as if the whole world was watching and ready to pounce. The best way to remain undiscovered, to keep from being seen as a freak, he concluded, was to close himself off from the world - a world of which he had once so wanted to be a part. The irony occurred to him every day. But, despite a daily chuckle, his predicament remained the same.

His mother watched him closely. Concern etched patterns in her face that even the accumulating years could not match. She tried to fill the void her husband's death had created, to be the mentor he had been to their son. Clark loved her and was frustrated for her. *No woman could be a greater mother, he swore, but she can't be a father, too.*

He heard her muttered prayers at night from her room. Even as passionate as they were, he would usually shut them out. But one night her voice, filled with powerless surrender, peaked in anguish, and he finally gave in: "Lord, in all Your love," she pleaded, "you gave us the most magnificent child in answer to our prayers. Once again, I thank you with all my heart. But . . . but if it's true that you never give us more than we can handle, and we all have a place in your plan . . . then please tell me what you want for Clark."

Considerin' how long it took Him to answer that other prayer, he imagined telling her, *you shouldn't hold your breath.* With a sigh, he fell back into his bed and plunged to sleep.

Floating through the glassy maze, transparent pillars surround him - quick reflections jumping at the edges of his sight - never quite seeing. They are of strangers, though not so strange - somehow familiar. Only glimmering white forms without faces, yet with souls that touch him. They are thousands upon thousands. Sad but not angry. Proud but not happy. Still but not dead.

One moved! Turning to face him. Features forming. *Is this me?* Older but similar. Around the eyes. The curling lock falling over the brow. Dressed in white, his chest blazoned with a crest. His lips parted, his tongue strikes his palate. A single sound comes forth:

“K . . .”

Over and over: “K . . . k . . . k . . .”

A broken record, as if the needle is stuck at the beginning of a word, but no one can fix it. *What are you trying to say?* His face is frozen, only his clucking tongue moves:

“ . . . k . . . k . . . k . . .”

What are you tryin’ to tell me? Speak!

“ . . . k . . . k . . . k . . .”

Speak, or shut up and leave me in peace!

Clark’s eyes fluttered open, and he shot up in his bed. Night was still thick. The radio, he had fallen asleep to, hissed, the end-of-the-broadcast-day long past.

“K . . . k . . . k . . .” There was no question that he was awake. The sound was no nightmare leftover. The pulsating consonant tingled his eardrum. The radio? He reached over and switched it off.

“ . . . k . . . k . . . k . . .”

He concentrated. It was not just any sound but a high frequency signal, like what he heard from Sputnik years ago as it orbited overhead. Homing in on its origin, he walked to the window and saw Old Jib scratching at the barn door; The dog heard it, too. *It’s the “package,”* he thought. “The Package from Heaven” was Ma and Pa’s name for the thing that brought them their son. He had looked at it once before, when he was ten. Angered by its frigid blackness, Clark let it be. *It’s just a rock,* he concluded, with nothing more to offer than the boulder he and Pa dug out of the south pasture before they plowed. Now, a tapping in his ear told him he was wrong.

“ . . . k . . . k . . . k . . .”

“Let’s have a look, boy,” he said to Jib, as he undid the latch and swung open the barn door.

“Kal-El.” The voice struck him like the crack of a whip.

What is “Kal-El?” Is it some sort of warning? Is it a word? A name? The signal stopped. The voice was gone.

Delving into the darkness of the barn, he kicked aside the hay under his feet, gripped an iron ring, and pulled open a trap door. Light burst from below and splashed over his face. In the center of the green aura was the source of the cold radiance. Set in the glass mosaic of the spacerock’s hollow, an emerald shaft blazed. The object, not so long as his forearm, glowed with an inner spark.

“Kal-El,” the voice returned with a blast, shaking Clark’s nerves.

What does that mean? he thought, reaching in and taking hold of the glowing crystal. With a yank, it snapped loose, continuing to glow even as he raised it from the hole. Jib barked at the thing and Clark hushed him.

A thousand questions whirled through his mind, none of which had answers except that the crystal continued to speak. Did it know more than the one word? *Speak up!*

Energy crept up his arm like a thousand panicked insects, up his spine, and nested in an unused portion of his brain - nudging him - prodding him - setting him on course. The crystal chimed words old to him, tapped from his memory, once sung with his Ma’s voice: “That a-way, son.”

Clark dialed, and the phone rung once . . . twice . . . three times - click!

“Uh . . . H - hello.”

“Ben, this is Clark.”

“Hey . . . uh, hi, Clark. You know . . . I’m not due for almost two hours yet.”

“I know. I just needed to talk to y’bout somethin’.”

“It can’t wait ‘til I get there?”

“‘Fraid not . . . You know how y’complain about the long trip in from town? I was wonderin’ if y’ might like to move out to the farm. My room’ll be openin’ up.”

“What’s this all about, Clark?”

“I’m gonna be leavin’, Ben; Wouldya look after Ma for me? “

“‘Course I will. Where y’goin’?”

“I’m not real sure, but I know I’m gonna be gone for a long time.”

“Y’know, Clark, your Ma and Pa have always confided in me. Y’know that, right?”

“Yeah. We . . . we’ve always appreciated that you can . . . keep a secret.”

“So you can tell me anythin’.”

“I . . . I don’t know how to explain. I don’t even know what I’m gonna tell Ma.”

“I see, well . . . you folks have always been real good to me. Whatever I can do to help out.”

“Thanks, Ben.”

Clark hung up the phone. He showered and dressed, packing a few things in his Pa’s old duffle bag - a comb, a toothbrush, a bar of soap. When done stuffing the bag, he was surprised to see that he had packed the small blankets that Ma and Pa had found in the meteorite.

Why did I do that? he wondered. The energy crackling in his brain told him not to question his actions. They were being guided. Guided by whom or what he did not know, but he was desperate to find out. On top of it all he placed the green crystal, now dark and sleeping.

The rising sun cut a slash over the horizon, splashing scarlet light through Martha Kent’s bedroom window. Clark watched the old woman stir awake to the sound of the cock crowing.

“Clark?” She rubbed her eyes and saw the duffle bag.

“I have t’leave.”

Ma got up, slipped into her robe, and joined her son at the foot of the bed. Fear, sadness, and amazement so filled her face that Clark thought he might spend the rest of his life sorting the emotions. “I knew this time would come . . .,” she said. “Your father and I always believed that God, generous to the faithful, would show your way. We knew it from the day we found you.”

“Ma . . .” he groaned, his head filled with so much to say and without the wisdom to express it.

“I know, son.” She hugged him tightly, her tears staining his wool coat. “Do you know where you’re goin’?”

Though less his goal than a clue to a mystery, his commanded direction was all he had: “North.”

He kissed her on the forehead and was gone.

White mountains, streaked in stoney black, jutted out of the horizon, clandestinely looming over the snow-covered plain. What lay beyond was a chilling secret meant solely for him. It could be a miracle or it could be a curse, but there was no finding out until the range was behind him.

Clark’s breath steamed the passenger side window, obscuring his view as the snowcat lunged to a halt.

“Here you go, boy,” the driver said, looking past the fur trim of his parka’s hood. “Are you sure

this is where you want to get out?"

"Yes, sir."

"I don't know how I let you talk me into this. You can freeze to death out there. There's *nothing* from this point north, and the nearest town to the east is--"

"Don't worry." Clark pushed open the door, a frigid wind, like a blade of ice, sliced through the cabin. "I'm meetin' somebody." He jumped out, slamming the door behind him. Duffle bag slung over his shoulder, he began his journey toward the mountains while the snowcat drudged on.

After about fifty yards of plodding through deep snow, he looked back and saw that the slow-going vehicle was out of sight. Nearly a week had passed since he left the farm. The energy planted in his brain drove him with lashes of anxiety, telling him every minute of every hour that he was going too slow. He had the power to get there fast. He knew it. The energy knew it - and the energy did not like being refused. Now he could no longer excuse his sloth. There was no one, absolutely *no one* who might see him.

Clark tucked the duffle bag under an arm and took off running. He laughed at his big steps through the snow. *I gotta look like an idiot*, he thought. But as his speed increased the snow gave way, ripping like cheap cloth. Huge waves sprayed up, while his blurring legs whipped a gouge through the bank. *Now this is more like it!* The freedom he once knew rushed over him. He laughed again, but this time in awe of himself - suddenly drunk on the bursting adrenaline he had refused for so long. The unfettered spirit that had propelled his racing feet down the old country roads now charged him through the arctic crust, meeting the icy wind with a broad smile. *Get a loada me! I shoulda been doin' this all along. To heck with 'em. If I can run like the wind, I shoulda been doin' it everyday. So what if I'm different? I'm better! I can do things that they can't even dream of. Look at those legs--*

His feet felt no friction. The waves of snow enveloping him had ceased. His legs were still a blur but his feet were no longer ripping through the snow. *Holy Cow!* He was hovering a good six inches above the snowy plain as his body tore the air. Halting his legs, the limbs dangle. *Gee Whiz!* He did not stop, did not even slow, but continued to race forward, the mountains before him getting rapidly closer and closer. He was gaining speed, his body angling forward - rising. *Dearest Lord in Heaven! I can't be flyin'. It's impossible!*

A hundred yards of ice and tundra crashed into Clark's face as he plowed into the frozen ground. He tumbled over and over like a boulder in an avalanche, coming to rest in a flurry of snow and dirt. As the debris disappeared with the wind, he lay in his crater and listened to his excited breath. *It's possible to be faster than anybody else. It's even possible to be stronger than anybody else. But nobody can fly!* His humongous gash in the arctic floor was evidence that he was wrong.

If I flew, what happened? Why did I suddenly plop down like a dislodged muffler? He could not help but think of Simon Peter walking on water and sinking when he no longer gazed upon Christ. Had Clark "lost faith?" *That's how Ma would put it, no doubt.*

Regaining his duffle bag, he took off again, charging, applying every ounce of energy. But after a couple of miles and the mountain peaks looming above him, he gave up. *Maybe it was just that thing in my head spurring me on*, he considered. One way or the other, it did not seem as if it were going to happen again.

He looked up at the ragged range of towering rock, encased in ice, and standing strong against murderous winds. "No sweat," he said, and ascended.

Six and a half hours and three mountains later, Clark stood on a summit looking down upon a landscape of beauty that shocked his imagination. Crowned in colorful flashes at the north, the panorama mirrored the aurora borealis undulating sensually in the deep blue sky. Dark shadows painted the broad plain, stretching long and sharp from the great frozen monoliths that slashed through the beaming glow of the arctic sun.

"This is it," he heard himself say, as he reached into the duffle bag. He pulled out the green crystal. It vibrated softly. The energy in his head blazed and, retracing the path that put it there, zipped from his fingertips back into the crystal. Then, Clark did what seemed the only thing to do; He threw the emerald object high into the air, sending it twirling over the icy plain - rising . . . rising, until it plunged and crashed into the glacier, leaving a tiny puncture in the massive whiteness.

Watching closely, his vision fixed on the blemish he had made, he waited. *What's coming?* The crackling in his noggin was not there to answer him. The tremor beneath his feet told him he did not need it.

The glacier quaked, the great bergs rocking and the slabs of ice cracking, shattering like strained glass. Steam billowed from the crevices as the icecap melted and boiled.

Clark's eyes shot open wide as he saw, from the frothing, dissolving stew, huge shafts of shining crystal drive upward. Two, three, four, a dozen, two dozen - thrusting together at odd angles like timbers trussed to construct a fort - a bizarre and magnificent fort of pure crystal. Continual bursts from the center of the growing structure sent bright emissions through the rising walls, the prisms splitting the rays into all the colors of the rainbow. The Northern Lights paled in comparison.

The quaking eased. The fireworks stopped, the lights dimming, and leaving as the only sound the whistling arctic wind.

Any words of description escaped the young man's mind. Even a shouted expletive like "Holy Cats!" or "Godfrey Daniels!" or "Great Scott!" would not serve. Never closing his awe-parted lips, he grabbed up his bag and dashed down the side of the mountain. With great bounds he raced over the glacier, until he skidded to a halt before the great translucent palace. "What secrets do you hold?" he asked, and listened for a reply as he slowly circled the structure. As he rounded it to the north, a triangular opening between angling crystal shafts beckoned to him.

With a deep breath, he plunged inward.

A fair light glimmered through the crystal beams and splashed colorful decorations over the walls and the sculpted levels that made for a floor. He leapt from level to level, rising higher and higher until he had a clear view of the interior. The place reminded him of a church, a big European cathedral. The center was set low, where a congregation may have sat had there been pews. Set high at one end was a crystal sculpture, unique to its surroundings by its compressed detail. Made of hundreds of thin, crystal shafts pointing straight upward, the object stood chest high. *A pulpit?* he wondered, as he worked his way toward it. *If so, it's the most overdone one from which a preacher saw fit to preach.* He stepped onto its foundation. The sculpture formed a semicircle with the crystal shafts set cascading away from the inside as if it were a control center of some sort. Control what? The “cathedral” was empty. There was nothing to be controlled - no sign of any object, let alone a machine.

If his conclusion was correct, that this was a device to be operated by someone, then to the operator's right hand was a “box”, a portion set off by four glassy sheets. Within the box were rows of crystals, much like the one which brought him there, except they were colorless like the lenses in a pair of glasses. He reached out and picked up one. It seemed the right thing. *What do I do with it now?* He rolled it in his fingers, looking for some detail that would explain its function. There was nothing to see.

Just as he was about to set it back in the box, one of the shafts at his left began to emit a tone, one of those high-pitched vibrations that only his ears could perceive. Only then did he notice that set deep within the transparent device was the green crystal, glowing even brighter than he had ever seen it.

He followed his instincts again and placed the end of the clear crystal to the end of the vibrating shaft. The end of the shaft opened like a suddenly-appearing mouth and sucked the crystal from Clark's hand.

The tone deepened. A greenish hue fell over the device, the floor, everything. He looked up and saw a glowing emerald cinder hovering in empty space before him. It was growing - rays stretching. It bloomed with the brilliance of a great world exploding! Then the flare collapsed in on itself and solidified, taking on a shape - light becoming clay molded by invisible fingers. Features warped into place: a nose, eyes, a chin, a mouth. A sculpted head. He instantly recognized its subject: the man in his dream whose face was so like his own.

The mouth moved. “My son . . .”

My son?

“You do not remember me. I am Jor-El, your father.”

My what!

The man's brow furrowed as he spoke thoughtfully, his eyes filled with understanding. “By now

you will have reached your eighteenth year as it is measured on Earth. By that reckoning I will have been dead for many thousands of your years. I have given you the full extent of my knowledge on your voyage to your new home. These are important matters, physical and historic, but, none-the-less, mere fact. There are questions to be asked, and the time has come for you to do so. In this 'Fortress of Solitude' we will try to find the answers together."

Clark watched intently as the figure of light appeared to take a deep breath as he considered his words.

"How does a good man live?" Jor-El continued. "What is 'virtue?' When does one's obligation to others exceed the obligation to one's self? There is no science to provide the answers; I can tell you only what I believe. So, my son, speak."

A hundred questions - two, three, four-part, multiple choice, true-and-false - flooded his brain and clogged his throat. Helpless, he compressed all his wonders into three simple words: "Who am I?"

Jor-El grinned. "Your name is Kal-El."

He called me "Kal-El." It's not a warning - not a word at all. Kal-El is a name. My name!

"You are the only survivor of the planet Krypton. Though you have been raised as an Earthling, you are not one of them. You have extraordinary powers, some of which you are only now discovering.

"Before you is your interface to the CrystalMind, the device that allows us to commune though we are separated by time, space . . . and death. The information shards that feed the interface will help guide our discussion. Shall we go forward?"

The image of Jor-El froze as another shaft on the console hummed. Clark responded by picking out another of the crystals from the box - *Information shards, he called them, didn't he?* - and "fed" it to the vibrating shaft. Again the tone deepened. Jor-El's face flickered and disappeared, leaving a spot of black that inflated, stretching all around him, blanketing him in a shadowy embrace.

"Let us begin on our home world," the voice of Jor-El spoke. "The planet Krypton."

A red blaze rolled at him. *A sun?* The flaming ball set in place as a much smaller green sphere spun into orbit around it.

"This is the place of our origin, nourished by the rays of a crimson star. There is much to learn of ourselves in the history of our world. Let us begin with the founding of the twelve clans, including the House of El from which we descend . . ."

Bombarded by sights, sounds, and experiences that fused all the senses, Clark absorbed whole libraries of knowledge.

“ . . . and the disappearance of the city of Kandor remains a mystery, unsolved even at Krypton’s demise. Let us look now to our acquired understanding of the six explored galaxies . . . ”

Six swirling masses of flickering specks hovered around. At his father’s command each galaxy grew and enveloped him.

“ . . . so here we see that life takes on many forms and comes about through different means . . . ” Time was streaking by, and Clark was losing track.

“ . . . temptations will come, my son, not only to the flesh but also to the spirit. Remember, never put one above all. Rather, love all humanity . . . ”

Lesson blended with lesson.

“ . . . so, the virtuous spirit has no need for thanks or approval, only the certain conviction that what has been done is right . . . ”

His teacher became his whole existence.

“ . . . By the time you have returned to your new world twelve years will have passed . . . ”

Twelve years? I would have thought hours.

“Live as one of them, Kal-El, to discover where your power is needed - but always maintain pride in your special heritage . . . They can be a great people, Kal-El. They wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all - their capacity for good - I have sent them you . . . my only son.”

A vortex twisted, the black of space swirling with stark light, the dark flushing away, until all that remained were the blazing white walls of the Fortress.

He caught his reflection in a polished pillar. He was not the same. Not at all. Was he taller now? No, pride was in his stance. He was a man without shame, with pride for all that he had to offer. Snugly wrapping Kal-El’s muscular form, was a suit of royal blue with a cape of scarlet. The blazing crest of the House of El stamped his chest.

The new uniform announced him. He was *The Guardian of Earth!*

“Ben! Ben!” Martha Kent hollered, rushing to the chicken coop as fast as her old legs would carry her.

The farm hand quit scattering the scratch, stepped over a couple of hungry hens and met Martha

at the chicken wire. "Yes, Ma'am?"

"Have you seen it?" she asked, frantically.

"Seen what?"

"That hawk is back. I think I saw it fly past the window."

"Doggone it! That thing got three of our best layers last time."

"You'd better get 'em back in the coop."

"Yes, Ma'am."

The old woman hurried back to the house, scanning the sky the whole way.

She had left out something in her warning; Ben would have thought she had finally slipped. She saw what flew past the kitchen window only out of the corner of her eye, and she would have sworn up and down that it was *red and blue*.

Best t'keep quiet, she thought. She could just hear Old Ben laughing: "Hawk? Sure y'didn't see a parrot?" *But it was so big! If it wasn't the hawk, what else could it be?*

Back in the kitchen, she looked again through the window over the sink to see if the preying bird might be circling. Nothing. Flustered, she tugged closed the gingham curtains and went back to snapping beans at the table.

She gasped. *What's that?* Floor boards creaked overhead. She immediately recalled that being a warm, Spring day the upstairs windows were open. Could the hawk have flown in?

There was another creak . . . then another . . . and another. *Someone* was in the house - walking down the hall toward the stairs. She pushed the beans away and nervously considered her options. She could call out the door to Ben, but he would not hear her; She would have to run back to the coop. *No*, she reasoned. *Who knows what the varmint would getaway with before I got back.* The image of the rifle stowed away in the cupboard popped into her head. She took down the bolt-action twenty-two and quickly loaded it. The whine of the second-story floorboards continued as she pushed through the swinging door, the rifle held ready, and slowly moved through the dining room. She heard the intruder reach the top of the stairs as she eased into the foyer. The morning sun, beaming through the window atop the staircase splashed over her.

A manly silhouette cut through the glare. Without shaking or stammering, she trained the rifle right at the figure's heart. "Who are you?"

The man took a step down the stairs toward her. She pulled the trigger. There was a bang, a thud, and a flurry of exploding plaster. The intruder did not even flinch.

Before she had a chance to pull back the bolt and aim again, the figure took another step down. “Stop!” she shouted, prepared to strike him with the rifle if need be. He thrust his hands out at her and she screamed.

She screamed so loud her tonsils almost leapt from her throat: “Clark!”

Dropping the gun and leaping into his open arms, she snuggled her smiling face into the checkered flannel of his shirt. The torn threads of the hole she had made with the rifle tickled her nose. Turning her head against his heaving chest, she looked to the wall and saw the impact from the ricocheting bullet. *What should I expect?* she laughed. *Didn't Doc Frye break needle after needle tryin' to inoculate the boy? 'Til Jonathan and I had to breakdown and tell him the story, a hard tale to take - and a secret, bless 'im, he took to his grave. So, sure as God makes little green apples, no mere bullet can harm my boy!* “I’m glad you’re home, Clark. I was so worried.”

“I wish I could stay.” Her son’s voice had matured with a thunder that befit the development of the rest of him. *He’s taller, isn’t he?*

The top few buttons of his shirt were undone, exposing the bright colors of something beneath. She pulled back from the embrace, tugged open the shirt, and ran her hand over the red-and-yellow crest. She recognized the feel immediately. No fabric she had ever touched came close to the texture - not like cloth at all, but like warm, dry sand. *The blankets that swaddled my baby!*

She dove back in for another hug.

Clark rested his cheek atop her head. “I have a purpose, Ma. A mission. It’s all clear now - clear as . . . crystal!”

“I knew it,” she said. “You’re gonna do great things.”

“I hope so.”

She beamed up at his smiling face as mother and son shared a moment of warm silence. “Son, I’ve got just one question for ya . . .” With raised eyebrows she looked back to his chest and asked: “Why the ‘S’?”

Chapter Four

“A Great Metropolitan Newspaper”

Metropolis was a magnificent, undulating behemoth of a city.

From dawn to dusk, among the jagged skyscrapers, the streets were crammed with citizens going about their overloaded lives - so bloated and leaden that they sometimes appeared to go nowhere. Their goings were frustrated by their own desperate ambitions, bringing them into stalled monoxide-huffing fury - like what Clark Kent looked down on from the ninth floor of the Daily Planet building. Better to be on foot, it seemed. Though the sidewalks swarmed so thickly with pedestrians that hardly a bit of concrete was visible, the walkers were getting along a lot faster than their motorist siblings, who only fumed, angrily blaming the person in front of them for the delay that went on for miles.

How do they make all this work? Clark pondered. The city of over eight million was the wealthiest and most productive in the world, placing it at the center of global commerce. Buyers and sellers - from the benevolent to the legitimate to the questionable to the *evil* - all found their paths running through Metropolis. Built at the hub of civilization, this was just where he needed to be.

Turning from the window, Clark looked back into the newspaper's buzzing city room. A maze of desks pushed together like dominoes in a well-played game left only slender passages for dozens of harried folk to scurry through. When two such speedsters going opposite directions met, tempers blew and expletives blared. Those sitting at the desks either joined in or delved intently into their work, ignoring the frantic bumping and shouting.

The busy scene reminded him of the vibrant hornet's nest from his boyhood, and he decided to play the game that had trained his hearing. He chose one member of the chaos and focused in on them.

His choice was a young woman hunched over her typewriter so tightly that she almost appeared to be part of the machine. Her dark hair was pulled back in a knot, but so recklessly, that locks fell into her face, draping it from view. Rattling away fiercely, she would not be bothered to fix it. She hesitated only momentarily to snatch a smoldering cigarette from an ashtray and took a drag without bothering to raise her head. She abruptly dropped the butt in its place and shot back to her typing.

She has an admirer, Clark noticed. A boy, no older than seventeen, hovered around her. He had a fancy camera slung around his neck and made a show of switching lenses back and forth, screwing and unscrewing them with mock casualness. He was trying to impress her, that was clear. *Probably explains the bow-tie, too*, Clark thought.

Suddenly halting, the young woman tossed back her head, allowing Clark finally to glimpse her face. *Oh, my . . . look at that.* Despite the nicotine and stress, her features were surprisingly soft, almost angelic - yet in her eyes shown a glint of the devil. She called out to anyone who would listen: "How do you spell 'massacre'?" The boy pushed in as close as he could and spelled slowly. Clark chuckled as the kid paused midway to take a whiff of her hair.

"Golly, Miss Lane, how come you get all the great stories?" the teen-ager asked.

“A good reporter doesn’t get great stories,” she replied. “A good reporter makes ‘em great!”
I like that motto, Clark thought, adjusting the horn-rimmed glasses that he was just getting used to wearing.

The door to the office of the Editor-in-Chief swung open, and the Editor’s assistant stepped out. “Mr. Kent? . . . Mr. White will see you now.”

Clark thanked the elderly woman, retrieved his briefcase, and headed in.

He was struck immediately by a volcanic plume of tobacco smoke. Behind a big oak desk was the bulldog of a man responsible for it. Perry White chomped hungrily on a fat stogy as he rattled the last page of Clark’s presentation. Posted on the wall behind him was a banner that read: “A Good Reporter Doesn’t Get Great Stories. A Good Reporter Makes Them Great!”
Hmmm . . . sounds familiar.

“Will you be needing anything, Mr. White?” the Assistant asked.

“No, thanks, Edna,” he answered, with a restless wave, sending her out of the office.

He studied his visitor severely, delivering an intimidating grunt. “I’d ask you to sit but, as you can see, I don’t have another chair. I won’t have my people lingering, wasting my time - I expect a ‘hop-to/to-the-point’ attitude, got me?”

“Absolutely, sir,” Clark replied.

White dropped the pages on his desk. “This is quite a story you’ve got here? It could blow a hole in the Northeastern textile industry.”

“You’ve reviewed my documentation?”

“Uh-huh. In fact, I gave a call to your source here in the city . . .” The Editor reached out and began thumbing the pages. “He confirms it.”

Clark looked down at his watch.

White’s eyes narrowed. “So,” he said. “I can have the story for the price of a job, is that right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well . . . I think we’ve got an opening in shipping news--”

“I was kinda hopin’ for the city beat, sir.”

White snarled. “I already have enough people on the city beat.”

“Are y’sure, sir? By definition, Metropolis is a ‘big city.’”

The old newspaperman took a big puff on his cigar and half-smiled. “Tell you what, give me your resume. I’ll check it out and give you a call--”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Clark interrupted, tapping his watch crystal. “But I’ve got an appointment over at the Star in less than half an hour.”

White’s face went red and vessels bulged in his temples. He recognized an ultimatum when he heard one, no matter how politely put. “Who in blazes do you think you are!”

Clark stepped straight up to the desk, looked down at the man, and spoke plainly. “A reporter, sir . . .” His cigar bobbing as he chewed, White rose from his seat as Clark finished his pointed statement: “with a hop-to/to-the-point attitude - with not much need for sitting.”

As White’s face paled to a healthy pink, a crooked smile creased his face. The two men had clicked.

“Chief!” The office door slammed open. Clark turned to see the woman who had caught his eye in the city room dart in past a flustered Edna. “Here’s that story on the Eastside Murder Case,” she declared, storming up to the desk. Ignoring the newcomer’s presence, she shoved a sheet of paper into her boss’ hand.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the Assistant said at the door. “I couldn’t keep her away.”

“That’s all right, Edna,” White answered. “Nobody pays you to be an animal trainer.” With a groan and a roll of her eyes, the Assistant pulled the door closed behind her.

White pushed the page back at the brash reporter: “There’s only one ‘p’ in ‘rapist’.”

The woman was stymied as she checked her mistake. The Editor took the silent moment to make an introduction: “Lois Lane, this is Clark Kent.”

“Hey!” she said at Clark, only allowing her eyes to pass over him as she rushed around the desk to corner her boss. *Was that “Hey! Nice to meet you!”?* Clark wondered. *Or was that “Hey! Get lost!”?*

“You remember my dynamite expose` on the drug orgies in the nursing home . . .” Lois fired off. This was not a woman who took a “no” easily - or at all, Clark realized. He listened with fascination. *She really puts herself on the line, doesn’t she? I’ve been around her for less than a minute, yet I’ve witnessed so much. When she thinks she’s right, she fights . . . and fights with everything she’s got. She’s not afraid to make it personal. But how far will she allow her determination to take her? And over whom?* He would have to temper his admiration with caution.

“It’s got sex,” she said, “it’s got violence, it’s got the ethnic angle--”

“So does a lady wrestler with a foreign accent,” White cut in. “Look, Lois, Kent here has brought me the kind of story the Planet really needs.”

Lois gave Clark an uncomfortable glance out of the corner of her eye.

White picked up a bottle of cream soda that had been sweating a sloppy ring on his desk blotter and winced as he tried to twist off the unrelenting top. “Kent, can you open this?”

“*My story* can be the basis for a whole series,” Lois said, snatching the bottle. With two mighty swings, she rapped the plastic neck on the edge of the desk, then pushed the container into Clark’s waiting hands.

Interesting, the young man thought, as he gripped the cap. *Is she so focused on selling her story that she didn’t realize that in her attempt to loosen the cap she has brought the contents to critical mass, or . . . did she do it on purpose? Well . . . there’s only one way to find out.*

He twisted. Crack. Hiss. White foam exploded, soaking him and everything else in a three-foot radius.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Lois said, her face stretched in alarm. “I didn’t mean to shake it up like that.”

Clark yanked out his handkerchief and quickly dabbed at himself. “Of course not, Miss Lane.” He stopped and looked her in the eye. “Why’d anyone want to make a total stranger look like a fool?”

The woman’s face shifted from one level of surprise to another, as if a whole other set of muscles were involved. *Could this be the difference between guile and sudden candor? Have I caught her in a ruse - caught her in an attempt to declare territory by humiliating someone she considers a rival? Oh, I’ll have to keep my eye on you, Miss Lane.*

“Olsen!” White barked. A curious and freckled face peered in at the door. “Olsen, why do I pay you 40 dollars a week when I should have you arrested for loitering? Go and get Mr. Kent a towel.”

“Sure, Chief.”

“Don’t call me ‘Chief.’ Who do you think I am? Geronimo?”

“Actually, Geronimo was a Medicine Man,” the boy said, hoping to impress.

“Go!”

“Hey, Edna,” the boy called out, stepping back and pulling the door with him. “Geronimo - I mean, Mr. White wants a towel.”

Edna screeched back: “Get it yourself, you obnoxious, little--” The door clicked shut.

“We can call the series,” Lois continued. “‘Making Sense of Senseless Killings - by Lois Lane’.”

Swigging his soda, White put an end to her pitch: “I’ll look over your story. In the meantime, why don’t you take Mr. Kent out and show him around.” He shoos them both to the door. “I’m putting him on the city beat.”

Lois spun in her tracks. “That’s my beat!”

White went from shoos to pushing. “For the last time, you don’t own the city beat. It can use one more good reporter . . . Metropolis, by definition, is a big city.”

Clark smiled. *I think he likes me. He reminds me a little of Pa. I remember how he and Ma used to- - Oh, I almost forgot.* As he and Lois stepped out the door, Clark reached into a pocket and pulled out a slip of paper. “Mr. White, could you arrange for half of my salary to be sent to this address on a weekly basis?”

White grabbed the paper and closed the door.

“Your bookie, right?” Lois smirked.

“No,” Clark responded. “I don’t gamble.”

“A regular Dudley Do-right, eh?” Lois laughed. “Don’t tell me, you send a check every week to your sweet, grey-haired old mother.”

“Ma has silver hair,” he said. Lois’ mouth dropped open, not in surprise this time, but in utter disbelief. *She’s havin’ a real problem figurin’ me out. If fortune holds she’s gonna keep havin’ that prob--*

A wad of paper towels was thrust at him.

“Here you go, sir,” the bow-tied photographer said. “I’m Jimmy Olsen.”

Taking the towels, Clark introduced himself and shook the boy’s hand.

“If there’s anything I can do for you,” Jimmy said, “just let me know.”

“Thanks.” *You shouldn’t be hard to find. I just gotta look to Lois and you’ll be looming’.*

Lois showed Clark to an empty desk not far from her own. No sooner had he sat and finished drying off than a copyboy flopped down a sheet of teletype paper in front of him. Eagerly, he laid claim to the announcement of a proposed city ordinance about Centennial Park’s upkeep. *Just the nice, quiet story I need to help establish myself.* He had already risked attracting too much attention with the Textile Industry story. But he could not help that. Had he not gotten the job, he would not have had anything to establish.

He picked up the phone and canceled his appointment with the Star.

After showing him where to sit, Lois never said another word to him for the whole day. She glanced his way a couple of times that morning, but they were not friendly glances. *Kinda cautious*, he thought. *She's afraid I'm playin' some sorta game. Does she see everyone as a reflection of herself?*

By noon, Clark found himself too wrapped up in his work to be concerned with his new “friend.” He spent hours on the phone tracking down members of the City Council. No one was available, and he wound up leaving messages. Then he made a trip to the Hall of Records. When he returned, he found that two city council members had responded. He followed up and made appointments for interviews the next day.

As he was packing up his briefcase before heading home, he wanted to say good bye to the ambitious lady reporter, hoping to curb any growing animosity between them. However, she was not at her desk or even in the city room. *Well, maybe we can start anew tomorrow.* So he took the crowded, nine-story elevator ride down and weaved his way through the busy lobby.

“Kent!” called a familiar voice. Turning, he saw Lois waving at him. Having just escaped another overstuffed elevator, she struggled to slip into her jacket while holding on to her purse. He stopped and waited for her to catch up. “Hey,” she said, a little out of breath. “Which direction are you headed?”

“Up Taylor here to the subway,” he answered, as they pushed through the revolving door.

“My car’s parked that way, I’ll walk with you,” she offered, slinging her purse strap over her shoulder.

“That’ll be swell.”

“Swell?” she chuckled, as the pair eased into the sidewalk traffic. “I’ve kind of noticed that you’re not from around here, are you?”

“Nope,” he replied, proudly. “I’m from Smallville.”

“I think I’ve heard of that. Where is it?”

“‘Bout thirty miles short of the Southwestern corner of the state. It’s a great place.”

“I’m sure. Look . . .” Lois pushed up close beside him, and spoke surprisingly low, as if all the strangers on the street had a peculiar and unwelcome interest in what she had to say. “Perry let me read your ‘Textile’ story. Frankly, he insisted on it.”

“What did ya think of it?”

Her cheeks were noticeably flushed. “It’s good. Very good. It’s clear you’ve got the chops.”

“That’s very nice of you to say.” Now she surprised Clark. If this was more guile, then her acting talent had developed a hundred fold since the cream soda fiasco. No, it seemed, she was being sincere with an almost perfect stranger, something that clearly was not common for her.

“I know I wasn’t too welcoming this morning . . .” she said.

“Forget it. It’s a tough business, I know.”

“And I think we can work together great . . .”

“Sure.”

“ . . . as long as you understand that I’m the *senior* reporter on the city beat.”

Atta girl, he thought. *No more games. Nice and direct.* “Understood, Miss Lane.”

“For crying out loud, quit calling me Miss Lane. It’s Lois. Nobody calls me Miss Lane but my mother, and that’s just to remind me what a disappointing, old spinster I’m turning out to be.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I don’t mean to be presumptuous -”

“Then what kind of reporter are you?” Lois cut.

Clark laughed. *This is one sharp lady.* “I was just wonderin’ if it bothered ya . . . bein’ unmarried?”

“Absolutely never,” she replied, directly - and squealed: “Ohhh!”

A hand slapped onto Clark’s shoulder, gripping it hard. “Listen up,” a voice hissed at his ear. “I got a gun in the chick’s back. Do what I tell ya and nobody gets hurt, got me?”

For the first time since he put on the horn-rimmed glasses, Clark regretted the identity game he was working. “Yes, sir. Whatever ya say.”

“Move into that alley. Slow and steady.”

The surrounding pedestrians ignorantly traveled by as they stiffly strolled into the grimy passage. Clark glanced over at Lois. He did not like the look in her eye. *That devilish glint is really glowin’!*

Directed against the wall of the alley, the reporters turned to see their attacker. He was a round-faced man, whose checkered blazer struggled to close over a bulging belly. Clark figured that the look on the man’s face - so vacuous it threatened to suck a hole through the fabric of space and time - was that of a fresh starter. He could see the fine tremble of the shiny black revolver and the drips of sweat coursing down his brow, and he could hear the rapid drumming of his

heart. *This fella could snap any second.*

“Okay . . .” the mugger said. “Uh . . . let’s see . . .” He looked at the palm of his free hand and seemed disappointed.

“You wanted something?” Lois asked.

His brow furrowing in frustration, he jiggled his gun frantically. “Don’t rush me!”

He had a sudden revelation, and, keeping a sharp eye on his victims, he clumsily shifted the gun to the other hand. Looking at the newly freed palm, he smiled and read from the crib note scribbled there: ““ . . . and nobody . . . gets hurt’. Dang . . . already said that.”

Watching the buffoon plod through his paces was painful. *He’s really not ready to be doing this alone*, Clark thought.

“Give . . . me . . . your . . . money.”

Clark reached for his wallet, but Lois was quicker. The gleam in her eye glared like a spotlight. She whipped the purse from over her shoulder, and, holding the strap by the tip of her fingers, dangled the prize. *Like bait*, Clark thought. *Are you tryin’ to get yourself killed, Lois?*

Licking his chops like a salivating Rottweiler, the thug slowly reached for the purse. Lois let the purse drop to the alley floor. “Doggone it,” the criminal swore, as he bent to pick it up.

With a smile that would have shocked the Cheshire Cat, Lois reared back on one foot.

Oh, no, Lois, Clark thought, as he watched the movement of the thug’s hand holding the gun. *If you try to kick it from his hand, it’s a gamble you’ll lose.* The finger on the trigger was as tense as a fiddle string.

Lois kicked.

The thug pulled the trigger.

Clark screamed.

Flashing on the memory of his third grade teacher, Mrs. Foster, suddenly confronted by a raccoon that crawled in the classroom window, he screamed with a pitch that rattled Lois’ eardrums and tossed himself in the path of the bullet, catching the slug with a swipe of his hand. Whomp! He slammed to the ground.

“*What* was that?” Clark heard Lois ask, impatiently. Adjusting the glasses that sat crooked on his face, he looked up and saw the young woman eyeing him critically.

“I - I guess I panicked,” he answered, rising and brushing himself off.

“Guess so!” she said, flippantly.

“Where did he go?” he asked.

She pointed out of the alley. “You scared him.”

“Lucky, aren’t we?”

“That had to be the *girliest* scream I ever heard.”

Clark shrugged and retrieved the briefcase he had unintentionally flung across the alley. His back to the woman, he dropped the bullet he had gripped in his fist.

A patrol car, with its siren blaring, screeched into the mouth of the alley. Two officers got out and stalked toward the two reporters. “We heard there was gunfire,” one of them said.

“He was just a bozo,” Lois said. “And he’s long gone.”

“Can you describe him?”

The two reporters wove a vivid description of the hoodlum. Something clearly struck a familiar chord with the policemen, causing them to exchange excited glances. “Get the pictures,” one said to the other. A file folder retrieved from the car was held open. Inside were three glossy photos. The first two photos were blow ups of police mug shots, one of a woman and the other of a man. Both subjects seemed confused as to the purpose of the pictures: In the first photo, a stunning blond woman with cheekbones you could cut butter with, tossed back her head and pursed her lips, poising one shoulder seductively as if she were modeling for a fashion magazine. In the second, his face smeared with a huge and amazingly stupid grin, a rotund man seemed to think that he was posing for his high school yearbook.

“That’s him,” Clark said. “No doubt about it. Isn’t that right, Lois?”

Lois was more interested in the third photo. It was grainy and slightly out of focus, apparently shot by a security camera. Pictured was a man in an overcoat, attempting to conceal his face with an upraised collar, light glancing brightly off his bald head. “This . . .,” Lois said, excitedly, to the policemen, “this is Lex Luthor, isn’t it?”

“Who’s Lex Luthor?” Clark asked.

Chapter Five

“Lex Luthor”

Twenty-two television screens decorated the wall beyond the console. Most were currently dark, but five of them glowed with activity as they monitored checkpoints through Union Station.

Slouching back in his leather swivel chair, Lex Luthor, in his burgundy smoking jacket and watched his plump henchman burst through a set of glass doors into the busy depot. The fat man pushed aggressively through the rushing, after work crowd. The device transmitted no sound but Luthor could see the man's lips moving: "'Scuse me. 'Scuse me.'."

"It's amazing that his brain can generate enough power to keep those legs moving," Luthor said to himself, his lips pursed agitatedly. His man suddenly stopped, sniffed the air, and darted to a concession stand with freshly-made popcorn. After he got a big bag of the buttery stuff, the thug shot off again in the same frantic, bumbling manner, stuffing his face as he headed for a door marked "Employees Only."

Don't forget the newspaper, Otis, Luthor thought.

Stopping in his tracks abruptly, Otis turned, and, as if reading his boss' thoughts, ran over to the newsstand. He searched his pockets for a quarter, sloppily slinging popcorn all over. *Your right-hand jacket pocket,* thought Luthor - and that is just where Otis found it.

Luthor had told him over and over again in every possible way short of Morse Code that he was to avoid attracting attention to himself as he made his way to the hideout. The sad matter, Luthor knew, was that Otis thought he was following instructions - this was as subdued as he got.

Tossing the quarter to the clerk, Otis snatched a copy of the Daily Planet. Then he took off again, trailing more popcorn as he went.

Despite everything, no one appeared to give Otis much thought - except a tall, thin-faced man in a tan leisure suit and a straw hat. He had a very pointed interest in the fat man. Whenever Otis was not looking in his direction, his eyes set right on him.

Spinning his chair, Luthor reached to a bookcase and pulled out a leather-bound scrap book proudly titled "Pains in the Neck." Photographs of policemen, federal agents, and anyone else who had ever got in his way filled the pages. *I thought you looked familiar,* he thought, finding the man pictured four pages in. Scrawled beneath the photo was "Sgt. Harry Felder - Metro Police." Luthor swung back to see Otis disappear through the marked door - and the straw-hatted detective follow only seconds later. Allowing his gaze to slide to the neighboring screen, he watched his henchman descend a dimly lit stairwell. Felder was only seconds behind.

Luthor shook his head in bewilderment. *If you'd only look over your shoulder, dimwit, you'd see that you're being followed. But that's just not going to occur to you, is it?* He looked to the next screen and saw his man waddle down a corridor that led to a section of railroad tunnel. Just short of the tunnel was a door to an old toilet. Beneath the old "Restroom" placard was a piece of notebook paper taped in place with the words "Out of Order" written in orange felt marker. Otis pushed his way through, the door falling closed just before Felder came out of the stairwell.

Luthor looked to the next monitor, which showed the inside of the old restroom in all its filthy glory. He grunted as he saw Otis stop and, leaning into the mirror over the sink, try apparently to

dislodge a kernel of popcorn from his teeth. *For crying out loud, get a move on!*

Looking back to the previous screen, Luthor saw Felder walk down to where the corridor, a maintenance passage not intended for public use, met the railroad tunnel. There was no platform, just a five-foot drop to the tracks. The policeman looked up and down the dark shaft.

Back in the restroom, Otis finally turned away from the mirror, a finger in his mouth as he picked at his teeth. He stepped into the rickety stall, locking it behind him. *Good boy.* The thug sat on the toilet and pulled on the empty toilet paper spindle. With a sudden jerk, the toilet began surging downward.

Felder, satisfied that his mark had not escaped through the tunnel, stalked back the way he had come. He looked at the restroom door, pushing on it lightly and finding it unlocked. He leaned in and listened. Luthor new the noise the toilet-lift made. *No doubt Felder can hear it.*

When Otis' head cleared the floor, a new, and identical, toilet slid into place - leaving no sign that the thug had been there.

The detective reached inside his jacket and pulled out a snub-nosed revolver. He eased open the door and walked in.

"Well, well . . ." Luthor sighed, leaning over his control panel. "The fun begins."

The cop cautiously looked around the small room. *Don't see anyone, do you?* He crept up to the stall.

"Three . . ." Luthor whispered, as he placed his finger on a toggle switch.

Felder tugged at the stall door.

" . . . two . . ."

Finding it locked, he shook his head in frustration.

" . . . one . . ."

He decided to look over the top, and stretched out on his tiptoes.

" . . . zero!" Luthor flipped the switch. The floor beneath Felder's feet fell away and the cop plunged, disappearing from the screen.

With a satisfied chuckle, Luthor reached up and turned on another of the monitors. *Sergeant fall down, go boom!* Felder tried unsuccessfully to rise to his feet. He tumbled back to the concrete floor, his face twisted in agony. *Hurt your ankle, eh?* He was trapped in a roughly constructed bunker. The place was featureless, save for an iron door at one end - and an odd device in a high corner. *Yes, here I am. Smile for the camera.*

Luthor grabbed a microphone attached to an articulated arm and yanked it to him. “Hello, Sergeant Felder. We’ve never met, but we know each other.” The wounded policeman looked at the camera quizzically, surprised to hear a voice coming from the odd-looking gadget. *Not seen anything quite like it, have you?*

“I am Lex Luthor.”

The policeman’s mouth began moving violently. “Take it easy. I can’t hear you, anyway. It’s best that you just listen.” Felder’s mouth shut as he gave the camera a wary stare. “I imagine you’d like to have your gun back,” Luthor continued. The eyes widened. *Just realized you were missing it, eh?* “The door is magnetized and has drawn the weapon to it. If you crawl over, you should be able to easily pull it free.” The policeman shifted his gaze back and forth, fearfully, from the camera to the iron door. *It seems too easy, doesn’t it, Felder?* Luthor laughed.

You’re right.

Felder dropped his weight on his forearms and started to drag himself across the floor. Luthor turned a crimson knob on his console, causing the door to slide upward. The revolver rose with it.

Felder pounded the floor angrily. He was still more than six feet away, his only defense lifted out of reach. Was he looking forward to getting up on that wounded ankle? The matter was moot.

With a quick adjustment on the control panel, Luthor zoomed in on the cop’s face just as it exploded in horror. “Sergeant Felder,” he lilted into the microphone, “I’d like you to meet my babies.” Zooming back out, he watched his two pets stalk eagerly from the dark chamber beyond the open door. Their muscular tails swayed back and forth and their forked tongues lashed. “Buffy and Jody come from one of the Indonesian islands. Perhaps you’ve heard of their species. They’re called ‘Komodo Dragons’. They’re the one form of life on this planet that must make humanity wonder about its position on the food chain.”

The policeman frantically scrambled away on his weary arms until he butted into the furthest corner - trapped!

“You may be interested to know,” Luthor continued, “Highly poisonous bacteria fill the Komodo Dragon’s saliva. If its prey manages to escape an attack, a single bite - even the tiniest of nibbles - will fester until the creature dies, allowing the dragon to hunt its victim at its own leisurely pace.” Luthor paused deliciously, gazing upon the rhythmic sway of the fearsome lizards as they sauntered forward. “Then again, perhaps this is pointless information, my dear flatfoot . . . as you are going *nowhere*.”

The dragons’ jaws chomped. Felder kicked and screamed as Buffy’s fangs lashed onto his leg and Jody bit into his belly. Luthor’s face twisted into the lemon-sucking pucker that one gets when fretting over a child’s skinned knee. Yet there was no pity, no sorrow. He did not know what compassion felt like - nor did he care, but he amused himself by pretending.

“Sick!”

Luthor spun in his chair to see his statuesque, blond paramour, in the open doorway. Wrapped in form-fitting Capri pants and a leopard-pattern tube top, she leaned against the door frame, her head shaking in disapproval while her nose wrinkled in disgust. Luthor switched off the offending monitor and pushed away the microphone.

“Sick, am I, Miss Teschmacher?” Luthor questioned, as he flipped on another screen to see Otis trotting down a narrow catwalk that hung above a stretch of open sewer. Satisfied, he switched it back off. “Sick? When I’m only days from executing the ‘Crime of the Century?’ How do you choose to congratulate the greatest criminal mind of our time? Do you call me ‘brilliant?’ No, granted, that would be too obvious. How about ‘charismatic?’ ‘Fiendishly gifted?’”

“How about ‘twisted?’” Miss Teschmacher said.

Rolling his eyes at her, Luthor pushed past the woman, escaping the confines of his control room to the open expanse of his grandly-decorated abode. Two hundred feet below the busy streets of Metropolis, he had taken the old subterranean train depot, long abandoned for the modern and more spacious station on the surface, and converted it to his devious and sumptuous needs. The old archways, magnificently sculpted from granite in a bygone era, were filled by garish beaded curtains that rattled noisily as bodies passed through. The high marble walls now exhibited works of art, long considered “lost” - as are many valuable things that come within Luthor’s reach. In lavish golden frames were portraits by Rembrandt and Da Vinci, landscapes by Van Gogh, Polynesian scenes by Gauguin, and the sorely-missed “Dogs Playing Dominoes” by - as Luthor put it - the “much misunderstood” C. M. Coolidge. Eclectic furniture, from Louis XIV to Art Nouveau, dotted the tiled floors and oriental carpets. Statuettes and potted plants shared decorative space with shiny calculating machines that flashed lights of red, green, and amber. Down a curved staircase, chlorinated water flooded a lower level, making for a swimming pool that Mark Spitz would have envied. If the mustachioed Olympian were the scholarly-type, he would have adored the extensive library that filled the bookcases lining the deep alcove beyond the pool.

Luthor sat himself down in the plush velvet chair aside his intricately-carved oak desk, facing the ten-inch thick titanium vault door that served as the sole entry to the lair. Miss Teschmacher took her usual position, resting her shapely behind on one of the chair’s cushioned arms. “Tell me something, Lex,” she said. “Why do so many people have to die for the Crime of the Century?”

“Why?” Luthor considered. “Why does the phone always ring when you’re in the bathtub?”

A clank of the latch, and the door groaned open. Luthor elbowed Miss Teschmacher. “Get off. You’re blocking my light.” Obeying, she strolled away.

Chomping on a mouthful of popcorn, Otis lumbered through the door, noisily shutting it behind

him. "Hello, Mr. Loo-thor," he said, with that painful squint that told Luthor that the glare bouncing off his head from the low-hanging lamp was having the right effect. It was an aura of godhood that validated his *true nature*, the shine stinging just right. With a cocked eyebrow, he eyed the greasy bag in Otis' hand. "Did you bring enough for everyone?"

His henchman stopped in mid-chew, hung his head like a hound dog, and offered his master the last few inches of his treat.

"No, thank you," Luthor responded. "I know for a fact that they don't use real butter."

Otis' head drooped even lower. "I'm sorry, Mr. Loo-thor."

"Yes, you are."

Luthor rose from his chair and snatched away the newspaper from under Otis' arm. "You were followed . . ." As if suddenly jabbed in the back, Otis whirled around to confront his tracker, scattering the last of the popcorn and knocking over a standing lamp in the process. ". . . in spite of those catlike reflexes."

Luthor glanced over the front page of the Daily Planet while his stooge picked up the mess. Helpfully, Miss Teschmacher pointed out the stray kernels that rolled out of Otis' view. "A few rolled under the desk," she said. "You'll have to reach."

"Ah," Luthor breathed, discovering in the lower left-hand corner of the paper the particular news for which he had been eagerly awaiting: "TEST OF TWIN MISSILES CONFIRMED."

Gleaming, he savored the fact that he was about to be involved in the greatest real estate swindle of all time. His thoughts soared back to something his late father had said to him: "Son, stocks may rise and fall, utilities and transportation systems may collapse - people are no damn good, but they will always need land and they will pay through the nose to get it!" On a rare occasion like this, he regretted the sudden elevator "accident" that took the Old Man's life so abruptly. *I probably should've given him another chance*, he thought.

The lamp again erect and the popcorn gathered, Otis looked to his master with his usual approval-craving grin. "Where's the gun?" Luthor asked.

"What?" Otis said.

Luthor took a remote control device from a pocket and pressed a button. In response, a section of marble wall flipped around, exposing a framed case that housed an extensive array of guns, a museum of firearms throughout history, from the Medieval "hand cannon" to the Colt Peacemaker to the Thompson Submachine gun. Near the bottom of the display was an empty spot labeled "Saturday Night Special."

"Do you realize," Luthor asked, "that gun was used in the famous Brinks Bank Job?"

His head hanging lower than it had ever hung, Otis tugged the weapon from his waist band and handed it to his boss. Luthor put it back in its place, stopping only momentarily to sniff at the barrel. The discharge was evident. "You know, Otis, you've been all over the police band this evening. Try to make a little extra pocket money?"

Otis shuffled his feet. "Well, Mr. Loo-thor, I was just thinkin'--"

"Oh, I doubt that," Luthor cut in. "Did you also know that the two people you held up are reporters for the very newspaper you brought me?"

"No, sir, I didn't. But . . . but . . ."

"I mean, you could've just asked them about the missiles while you were at it. You could've SAVED US A QUARTER!"

"I am so, so, so *sorry*."

"And, once again, yes, yes, yes, *you are*! You came within centimeters of bringing the authorities right to my door!"

"Geez, Lex," Miss Teschmacher jumped in. "Leave the poor moron alone."

"You're just lucky, Otis," Luthor shot, sitting back in the velvet chair, "that the babies have already eaten."

"Yes, sir." Sniffing back unmanly tears, Otis wandered off to his room.

"Now, Miss Teschmacher," Luthor said, with a sigh, flipping through the newspaper and leaning back, "I'll have a brisk scalp massage and a quick buffing."

The woman took out her chamois and scalp polish tin from an end table drawer and went to work. As Miss Teschmacher's fingers kneaded, Luthor snapped open section C, took out a pen, and began calmly studying the crossword puzzle. "One-across," he murmured as he read. "An eight-letter word meaning 'Neitzsche's Ideal' . . . " *How simple*, he thought, as he filled in the squares: "S . . . U . . . P . . ."

" . . . T . . . H . . . O . . . R. Luthor. Lex Luthor," Clark said to himself, as he lifted the file from the cabinet drawer. Three days before, after first mentioning the name, Lois dragged her fellow reporter into White's office and tried to push a story. For half an hour, the Editor listened to her excitement. When she wound down, he took a series of puffs on his stogy and spoke plainly: "Listen, Lois, there's no story here. You were mugged. That's it."

“The police said that the guy worked for Luthor! Didn’t they, Clark?”

Leaning quietly by the door, Clark was unsure of an answer. “Well, I . . . uh . . .”

Lois narrowed her eyes. “Didn’t they?” she growled.

“They showed us some pictures . . .” he said, hesitantly. “One was the guy who mugged--”

“I got that,” Perry interrupted. “Another picture - a poorly focused photo, by your own statement - was of someone you decided was this great criminal mastermind called Lex Luthor. And when you asked if the man in the photo was indeed Luthor, how did they answer?”

“They nodded,” she said, proudly.

“Uh-huh,” White said, uncertain. “Is that right, Clark? Did they nod?”

“Well . . .” Clark sighed, as Lois glared at him, “one of the officers . . . sort of . . . laughed.”

“Laughed?” White exclaimed, pulling the cigar from his teeth.

“But he nodded while he laughed!” Lois argued. “They’re not just going to come out and say it. Bill Henderson has got the department--”

“There’s a reason you never read about Lex Luthor in the Planet, Lois” Perry said, sharply.

“News requires proof. You’ve got nothing to substantiate your theory. And it’s barely a theory. Here’s what you’ve got: You two were held up by a guy who may or may not be in cahoots with somebody who may or may not be a criminal genius who may or may not exist. Isn’t that right, Lois?”

She groaned, sickly.

“So, as you know, that ain’t news,” White concluded. “And as I am a news editor, GET OUT!”

Briskly, Lois stormed back into the city room.

“I’m sorry, Mr. White,” Clark said, turning to follow her.

“Don’t be sorry for her, Kent,” White responded, pointedly. “She may lose her way occasionally, but she’s the best reporter I’ve ever known. Don’t think one good story gives you the right to criticize. I want to see that kind of fire pour out of you! Understand?”

“Understood, sir.”

Lois did not let more than an hour go by without bringing up Luthor. The man she described was a living shadow - a phantom, who so frightened the powers-that-be that they spoke of him among themselves only in hushed tones and denied the very thought of his existence to outsiders.

Standing in the suitably dead silence of The Daily Planet's "morgue", he grazed through the bits-and-pieces sandwiched in the manila folder. Scraps of newsprint were snipped from publications whose yellow journalism was particularly jaundiced. In fact, only one article was from a legitimate periodical. In '74, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reported a story on which Lois had concentrated when explaining why she considered Luthor so devious and why he remained obscure:

IS OUR GOLD SAFE?

FORT KNOX, KY. - According to a former guardsman at the stronghold of our nation's gold, approximately 250 million dollars worth of bullion was mysteriously removed and replaced with clay bricks painted to resemble the stolen wealth.

Corporal Martin Todd, recently discharged, says that in March of this year, General Austin Letroy, Commandant of Fort Knox, received a letter by special courier informing him that six months earlier a quarter of a billion dollars in gold had been stolen and that, apparently, the Army had managed not to detect the theft. "I was on the detail that responded to the letter," Cpl. Todd says. "I scratched the bricks myself . . . Gold paint on red clay."

"The letter did not explain how the gold was stolen," he continued, "but it was signed 'Lex Luthor'."

Attached to the article was the retraction printed two weeks later along with some notes written by Lois herself: She had highlighted the phrase "unreliable source" and scrawled next to it "Committed to looney bin." Further down she had highlighted the quotation from General Letroy that "the Army denies all aspects of the corporal's charges" and, with her pencil, expressed her feelings in two words: "Embarrassed . . . Scared." *Maybe so*, Clark thought.

"Mr. Kent!" Jimmy Olsen darted down the aisle of filing cabinets, his voice echoing through the basement room.

"Hi, Jimmy. What's up?" Clark said.

"The Chief sent me down to warn you about the storm."

"The storm?"

"Yeah. A big one's on its way. You'll want to get headed home. The last time a storm like this rolled in, we had a power outage that shutdown the subway for hours."

"Thanks. I'll get my things and get out of here."

Chapter Six

“Up, Up, and Away!”

Grabbing his overcoat off the rack by the water cooler, Clark nearly collided with Lois as she barreled out of White’s office. “Where’s the fire?” he asked.

“Fire, nothing! I got the kind of interview that any reporter worth his salt would die for.”

“Get a move on!” White barked, from his open door. “The airport says he’ll be landing in about twenty-five minutes.”

“Gotchya, Perry,” she said.

“Who’s landing at the airport?” Clark asked, following her back to her desk.

“The storm is forcing Air force One to land here in Metropolis,” she explained, excitedly, as she threw her things together and shot toward the elevators. “This kid’s gonna be there to make sure that you-know-who answers a few questions he’d rather duck.”

“Can I walk you to your car?”

“Not driving today. Got to get to the roof.”

“Pardon?”

“They’re revving up a chopper for me on the heliport.”

Clark wished her luck as she managed quickly to catch an upward-bound elevator. He was not so lucky; Five long minutes ticked away before he heard the chime of a descending elevator, then he found himself forced shoulder-to-nose-to-ear-to-neck with a grumbling pack anxious to beat the oncoming tumult.

“They say it’s gonna make the storm of ‘72 seem like a run through the sprinkler,” said Lombard from Sports, as he slid a cigarette between his lips.

“Don’t you dare light that thing in here!” warned a woman from the Living section.

“Don’t worry, sweetie,” he replied. “I can hold out for five more floors. Four . . . three--”

Clark heard a crash of metal on his hypersensitive eardrums and absorbed a sharp vibration that

he felt in the deepest part of his spine. It came from high above.

“Hey!” shouted a young woman to his right.

“Did you feel that?” Clark asked, surprised.

“I sure did,” she spat. “And Lombard better keep his hands to himself!”

What in the name of Krypton happened? he wondered.

An alarm blared, and the elevator lunged to halt. The filthiest language Clark had ever heard roared as his co-workers cursed their prison and demanded to know what was holding them up. Suddenly the elevator started again and slowly lowered to the main floor. The door slid open.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” an awaiting security guard called over the blasting alarm. “Don’t worry, there is no fire, but we need you to file out the east entry in an orderly fashion.”

“For crying out loud!” Lombard bellowed. “For the first time in two years I managed to get a parking spot right in front of the building!”

“Can’t be helped, sir.”

Swept along with the swarm, Clark exited out the eastern bank of doors into the storm-stirred winds. He broke loose and darted down a side alley to the front of the building.

Whirring sirens blasted as police cars and fire engines pulled up. A handful of Daily Planet security officers pleaded with the swelling throng to stand away: “Please, keep back! Keep back!”

The people glared upward to the top of the building that dissolved into the darkening twilight sky. “How did it happen?” jabbered one exasperated voice.

“It was trying to take off from the heliport,” came an answer. “Something went wrong and a gust of wind--”

Crashed on the edge of the building, a helicopter teetered dangerously in the growing torrent. Focusing his powerful eyes, Clark peered into the cockpit: A pilot with a bloodied head sat unconscious, while, in the seat next to him, his passenger struggled to free herself from her restraint. “Lois!” he groaned.

The spectators screamed as the helicopter violently jerked, tipping on its side. The dead propeller swung around and sliced into the edge of the outer-structure, chopping off chunks of flying cement and hurling them to the ground below. With a screech of metal, the collision halted the machine’s fall. *But only for the moment*, he knew.

He scanned the street. *The time has come.* He had hoped to lay low for another few weeks but fate had staked its claim. *Where to go?* People filled even the alleyways. He saw the empty

phone booth across the street. He only needed seconds. The booth would do. All eyes fixed on the tragedy above, he pushed through the crowd and stepped into the glass box. Clark slid the door shut. The booth trembled as a tornado whirled inside. In a breath, the door slammed open and the sole of a fiery red boot touched the concrete walk.

A little boy, holding the hand of his distracted father, looked up into the cool blue eyes of the brightly clad stranger.

Kal-El winked. "Hello," he said - and stepped into the sky.

"Hey, Pop," he heard the boy say to his father. "The man *fell up!*"

As he spiraled, higher and higher, splitting the wet winds, the masses below heralded his appearance: "Look! Up in the sky!"

"It's a bird!"

"It's a plane!"

"Holy Cow! That guy's flyin'!"

Above, the helicopter rocked. Lois was crawling over the unconscious pilot. If she could push open his door that faced the sky, she would have a chance - a slim chance - to jump to the roof.

Hold on, Lois. I'm coming.

Lois pushed on the door hard, then harder, then - she lost her grip on her seat and dropped . . .
Don't fear!

She thrashed her arms, grabbing at everything - hoping something would stop her fall. But gravity was too strong . . .

Gravity's got nothing on me, Lois!

She tumbled over the unconscious pilot, burst through the passenger door, and plunged screamingly into space.

Kal-El shot passed the twelfth floor - thirteenth - fourteenth. Lois zipped past the twentieth - the nineteenth - the eighteenth. At the sixteenth he reached out . . . "Don't worry," he said, and snatched her about the waist. "I've got you!"

"You've got me?" Lois squealed, looking down. They were hovering in midair. "Who's got you?"

Kal-El could not help but laugh. "Up we go."

His charge held firmly, he ascended. The audience below roared over their nameless hero: “He caught her! I can’t believe he caught her!”

“Who is he?”

“*What* is he?”

“Who cares? Thank God he’s here!”

Kal-El heard the strain of the iron railing that had snagged the landing gear. It groaned - cracked - *exploded!* - breaking the helicopter loose - toppling - with Lois and her savior directly in its plunging path. Lois screamed. The crowd joined in.

Kal-El sped up - racing faster toward two tons of free-falling steel. Lois jammed her face to the flying man’s chest as he reached out - *This is all very showy, isn’t it?* he thought. *Is a bird showing off when it flies?* No, Pa said. - and grabbed the machine’s landing gear.

The woman in his grasp pried open her eyes and rolled her gaze up his extended arm. “Oh, my sweet Mary--! You caught it!”

“I couldn’t let it fall. It might have hurt someone,” he said.

“Might have!” Lois exclaimed in irony.

The cheers from the street blasting higher than ever, Kal-El flew over the edge of the building. Setting down the helicopter with the lightness of a tea cup, he called over the two stunned heliport attendants. “Gentlemen, the pilot needs help,” he said, studying the wounded man through the windshield. “His heart beat and breathing are fine, but he has a concussion.” The men took the magical figure at his word.

Seeing the pilot cared for, Kal-El slipped his arm from Lois’ waist. She seemed disappointed. “I hope this incident hasn’t put you off flying, Miss,” he said.

“Uh . . . uh . . . no.” Overwhelmed, no pretense distorted her features. Kal-El recalled the face of Lana Lang for comparison. No. No, there was nothing of the fear that had cursed Clark Kent - no raising of the brow or twitching of the lids that said “What on Earth are you?”. Lois’ mien was tender awe, wordless gratitude, and . . . completely void of recognition! She did not see the bespectacled and necktied Clark Kent though she stared him straight in the eye.

“Statistically-speaking, flying is still the best way to travel,” he told her.

“Sure,” she replied. “I guess you’d know.”

“Goodbye now.” With a wave he rose into the air.

“Wait! Who . . . who are you?” she cried.

“A friend,” he politely answered, then “fell up” into the burgeoning night.

This was the opening night of all opening nights; No excitement surrounding a Lerner & Loewe first performance could beat it. Blazing beams of search lights crisscrossed through the dark sky hunting for a brief glimpse, an encore. He graciously obliged, spinning and rolling to the cheers of the people of Metropolis.

A burst of gunfire stole his attention.

The violence came from Hob’s Bay. A pair of police cruisers screamed in hot pursuit of a blue sedan. In the seconds that Kal-El observed from a distance, the sedan sideswiped two other cars and almost ran down three people in a crosswalk. *He’s got to be stopped!* With the grace of an Olympic diver, the Kryptonian plummeted, weaving through the tall buildings until he was right above the chase. His vision penetrating the steel chassis, he saw that the blue car had four passengers - men in coveralls, gloves, and ski-masks. They were heavily armed, and the two in the back seat held money bags freshly stolen from the Metropolis First National Bank. *Sorry, fellas, but you picked the wrong night for this!* Somersaulting, he dropped in front of the car, his feet cracking the pavement. He put out a hand, smacked the hood and jolted the car to a halt. The crook in the passenger seat leapt out, a submachine gun in his hands, and fired away at the red-and-blue suited obstruction.

“Oh, my God!” The masked man screamed. Not a one of his bullets affected the caped man! Kal-El marched forward and snatched the gun away with one hand and plucked off the ski-mask with the other, revealing the man’s face frozen in an exaggerated but familiar expression. *Now, I don’t mind that look from the likes of him. In fact, I really like it!*

The police cars caught up and squealed up behind the sedan. Shocked officers sprang out, guns drawn. “Wait’ll Inspector Henderson hears about this!” one of them said.

The other three bank robbers jumped out of the getaway car, threw their weapons and the money on the ground, and shot their hands in the air. “When did you guys become bulletproof?” the driver asked.

An officer, holstering his sidearm, slowly approached Kal-El. “Who are--?” Before the policeman could finish the question, the hero held up the submachine gun and wrenched it into a knot.

“Here,” Kal-El said, handing it to him. “Give this to your Inspector Henderson. Tell him we’re on the same side.” He soared back into the sky.

The storm finally billowed over the city - lightning flashing above the clouds, flickering like Christmas lights covered in angel hair. A drizzle, thrashed by wind and building steadily, sent the swarming Metropolitans indoors. Yet Kal-El caught sight of one blond-braided little girl whose determination prevented her from having “the sense to come in out of the rain.” In the high branches of a tree in the residential Schaffenberg district, a white cat perched nervously, mewling in fear.

“Get inside!” the girl’s mother shouted from the window of their house.

“I have to get Frisky down,” the girl argued.

“He’ll come down in his own good time. I don’t want you catching cold.”

“Frisky! Come down, Frisky!”

“Oh, for crying out . . .” Her mother dropped the curtain shut as she ducked back into the house.

“Frisky! Please, please come down!” the girl continued, jumping up and down as rain soaked her checkered dress.

“I’ve got him!”

The girl gasped as the man in the red cape dropped from the sky. He slowed his descent for a moment to gently lift Frisky from his quivering roost, then alighted on the sidewalk before of her. “Here you are,” he said, handing over the relieved feline, purring warmly at the man’s touch.

“Thanks, mister.” She had trouble looking up past the big red-and-yellow symbol on his chest. “What’s the ‘S’ for?”

The door to the house swung open, and the girl’s mother stepped out onto the covered stoop, a towel in hand. “For the last time, get--!” Her mouth dropped open at the stranger in the bizarre costume.

“Your Ma’s right,” Kal-El said. “You’d better get in out of the rain.”

Cuddling her cat, the girl scampered up the stoop to her mother. “Look. He got Frisky out of the tree.”

“What’s the matter with you,” the woman said, angrily. “How many time’s have I told you not to talk to strangers!”

“That’s a very wise rule, Ma’am,” Kal-El agreed. Pushing off easily with his toes, he rose into the stormy sky. “Good night!”

He never heard a response from the woman.

“Mommy, you should have seen him,” her daughter said. “He swooped right out of . . . Mommy . . . Mommy? . . . Mommy, are you all right?”

Clouds rolled in thicker and thicker, expelling their weight in crashing torrents and discharging their fury in flashing, jagged arcs. The grumbling and crowing of restless thunder would have smothered the sound of the jet engines from anyone else’s hearing, but it did not conceal the danger from the Kryptonian. Puncturing the cover, he rose high above the tempest and studied the craft’s descent.

“Metropolis Tower, this is Air Force One. We are beginning approach. Advise. Over.”

“Roger, Air Force One. Weather conditions have become severe. We advise reroute to Baltimore. Baltimore Airport reports weather stabilizing. Over.”

“Negative, Metropolis. Dangerously low on fuel. Have aborted attempts in Cincinnati and Cleveland. Must land now. Advise! Over!”

“Roger, Air Force One. You are cleared for landing on runway two. Emergency procedures in effect. Over and out.”

Kal-El dove into the froth, sparks tingling his hypersensitive flesh. The cloud built its charge like an airborne generator readying to release. Its inevitable target: The tons of winged metal slicing through it.

He searched the mist, scanning with his powerful vision. Crackling power blossomed like a white rose high above the plane. *You’ll have to get through me!* he thought, as he rocketed, hurling his body at the blaze.

The flower exploded!

A flashing ribbon shot forth. Kal-El caught it with his chest, the energy splashing over him in an electric wave. *Gotchya!* He smiled as tiny blue arcs scrambled down his arms. *Blessed Rao, that felt good. Wouldn’t mind doing--*

Out of the corner of his eye he saw another blossom. He swerved. It burst!

Too late!

The bolt lashed out. At light speed, the fiery tongue licked the jet, snapping off the tip of the left wing in a roar of flame - and taking an engine with it.

“May day! May day! We have lost our number one engine! Metropolis, acknowledge!”

Air Force One plunged out of the cloud, swooping aimlessly toward the thickly-populated city below.

Kal-El followed, anxiously. The problem was not the weight; He could handle the plane with the ease of tossing around a beach ball. Nor was it the size. The pilot trying to control it was the problem. *He'll fight me like he's fighting the wind and rain.*

Milliseconds ticked by.

Got it! He swung beneath the plane and examined the wounded wing. The charred framework of the lost engine held to its place. *So that the pilot doesn't confuse me with the weather, I'll become part of the plane!* Rising into the framework, he grasped hold and eased the vessel upward, stabilizing the descent.

“Air Force One, radar shows your decline has slowed and angle aligned. Report status. Over.”

“Report status, Air Force One.”

“Air Force One, report status, please.”

“Status, Air Force One! Report st--”

“Uh . . . this is Air Force One, Metropolis . . . We . . . uh, we . . . Gee Whiz, Mary, and Joseph . . . uh . . . All systems normal. En route to runway two. Currently at six thousand . . . Holy Gosh . . . Six thousand feet and descending. Over.”

“Air Force One, you called ‘May Day’. Has emergency ceased? Over.”

“Yes, Metropolis. Emer . . . emergency has ceased. Our wing . . .”

“Air Force One, we have lost transmission. Over.”

“Sorry, Metropolis. Have . . . have you seen that ‘Twilight Zone’ with the thing out on the wing of the plane? Have you seen that? Uh . . . over.”

“Roger . . . Are you reporting that you have something on your--?”

“Negative, Metropolis. Not ‘something.’ *Someone!* And he’s just saved our bacon!”

Kal-El smiled broadly as he gazed up and saw, in a window just above the wing, a face that he had seen printed time and again on the front page of The Daily Planet: The President of the United States!

Proudly, he raised his unoccupied hand to his brow and greeted the Leader of the Free World

with a salute. The President, with a frozen look of awe, absently returned the accolade.

Air Force One landed perfectly. When the landing gear squealed on the runway, the hero released his hold, shot off into the storm, and headed north.

The image of Jor-El shimmered a clear blue against the crystalline fortress walls. “You enjoyed your first time as their Guardian, didn’t you?” were the first words from the ancient Kryptonian’s lips as the three-dimensional projection took form.

The astuteness of his father’s CrystalMind startled Kal-El. *It’s almost as if it can read my mind!* “How could you know?” he asked.

“I have anticipated it, my son.”

“How could you know how good it felt?”

“The delight in work done in the good of others is a blessing.”

“I think I may have gotten carried away.”

“For that reason you must keep your dual identity.”

“Why, Father?”

“You must act always with compassion . . .”

“But I . . . I did.”

“Yes. On this first occasion your deeds were benevolent. Yet, in time, as you come down from the heavens to aid them with your power this will change. You will soon act out of condescension, then arrogance, then - I fear - *malevolence*.”

“Never! I could never--”

“In the Writ a passage reads ‘One who sits alone at an endless feast, will starve the world for the sake of his hunger.’ On Earth they are more blunt: ‘Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.’ You must walk among them as one of them - to understand them, to have compassion for them. Only empathy can make you their hero.”

Jor-El’s words pricked at his son’s memory, stirring up cryptic wisdom bestowed on him long ago in another voice - a voice long missed: *Always keep Clark in your heart*. Words slipped quietly past Kal-El’s lips: “That’s just what Pa was trying to . . .” He hushed himself. Was he being disloyal to the man who had brought him into the Universe, saved him from doom, and

schooled him in knowledge beyond anything known to Earthlings? “I - I’m sorry.”

Jor-El’s image froze, rippled, and started again, his expression now stern. “Do not be embarrassed by those who have loved you, who have taught you to be the noble person who first came to me. Know that if I might walk your world I would consider them friends . . . No, much more than that. I would hold them as family.”

“Yes, Father.”

“To care is the greatest power of all. You must carry that message with you. No act of superpower can compare.”

Kal-El nodded. In thinking of his deeds that night, he had reveled in the magnificence of his power and the awe he had caused in those who witnessed them. What a fool he had been! *When I saved the President’s plane, how much thought did I give to the people inside?* he pondered. *I thought only of the pilot fighting what I was trying to do. I never considered anyone else until I saw the President gazing down at me. Then, I just gloried in his wonder.*

“Do not punish yourself for these feelings of vanity,” Jor-El continued. “But, as I have advised, control them. It was this affliction that caused the destruction of the Kryptonian race. If not for the vanity of some who considered us indestructible . . . If not for that hubris, my son . . . I could, at this moment, hold you in my arms.”

The image flickered and dissolved. The Fortress darkened. The interface went cold. The lesson was over and Kal-El was left with only the imagined warmth of his father’s embrace.

Chapter Seven

“A Friend”

Lois was pressed far more snugly to Bill Friesen than she liked, his Hi Karate stinging her eyes. But, unable to budge an inch, she would bear it out. Perry White had crammed his office with every reporter short of the Women’s section staff and Sports. At least a half-dozen people had to stand outside and listen to Edna’s replay as she watched the explosive proceedings from the door. “I haven’t seen Perry like this,” Friesen whispered to Lois, “since Watergate broke.”

White’s voice went up two octaves, as he stormed back and forth behind his desk, spewing rapid fire phrases. He held up a copy of that morning’s Post, quoting the banner headline “‘IT FLIES!’,” Then he brandished another newspaper: “Get this, the Star: ‘LOOK, MA, NO WIRES!’.” And another: “‘BLUE BOMB BUZZES METROPOLIS!’.” And finally he held up the Planet itself, with the headline: “CAPED WONDER STUNS CITY!” He slammed the paper

back on his desk. “I want the name of this flying whatchamacallit to go with The Daily Planet like bacon and eggs, lox and bagels, politics and corruption!”

“Mr. White,” a voice popped up, “I don’t think he’d lend himself to any cheap promotion schemes.” Pressed into place, Lois could not see the speaker but she recognized his voice.

“And just how do you come by that impression, Kent?” White growled.

“I - I ‘d like to think that his actions speak to his character,” Kent responded.

“Well, I’d like to think that, too, kid,” White declared. “But this isn’t about what you think - or about ‘cheap promotion schemes’. This is about the news. This *Man of Steel*, with bullets bouncing off him, is news. I want the people of this city to be assured that when they want to know something about this guy all they’ve got to do is pick up the Planet. Got me?”

“Yes, sir,” Kent said. “Got you.”

“Find the real story,” White barked. “I want the inside dope on this guy. Does he have a family? Why did he show up last night? What’s he got beneath that cape? Roman candles?” He stuck one of his fat Cubans in his mouth and lit it with a noisy snap of his lighter. “I’m telling you, boys and girls, whichever one of you gets it out of him is going to have the single most important interview since . . . God spoke to Moses. Now, what are you standing around for? Move!”

The crowd rapidly dispersed, and Lois, hearing the ring of her phone, darted back to her desk. “Lois Lane,” she announced into the receiver.

“This is Inspector Henderson of the Metropolis Poli--”

“Hello there, Inspector. What can I do for you?”

“I’d think you could guess, Lane.”

“My intuition is running on low today.”

“About this ‘Caped Wonder’, what can you--”

“What Caped Wonder is that?”

“Don’t be coy. I mean the guy who flew up and saved you from a forty-story splat. What do you know?”

“I’m not one to scream and tell, Inspector.”

“Give it up, Lane!”

“I tell you what, maybe we can make a trade: I’ll give you what I know on the flying man if you give me the poop on Lex Luthor.”

“I . . .”

“Inspector?”

“I don’t know who you’re talk--”

“Good bye.” As Lois dropped the receiver back in its cradle, a slip of paper tucked under the telephone caught her attention. It was a note. “Tonight at eight,” the message read. “Your place.” It was signed: “A Friend.”

She gasped. *A Friend?* Could it be from her flying hero? Her journalist instinct would not allow her to jump to the conclusion. Perhaps some unwanted admirer had just coincidentally picked the phrase.

“What’s the matter, Lois?” Friesen asked, as he dug deep into his top drawer searching for something.

“Bill . . . did you leave this note on my desk?”

“Note?” he said, finally finding his half-empty bottle of Hi Karate. “Why would I write you a note? I haven’t been more than ten feet away from you all morning.”

Don’t think I didn’t notice, she thought, cringing as she watched him slap on another dose of his scent. *I’ll celebrate the day when they quit making that stuff.*

Nervously chewing her lip, she scanned the city room, taking note of every man there. *If it’s not the flying man, who could it be? What if it’s some sort of weirdo?*

“Didn’t he sign it?” Friesen asked.

“Not really . . . uh, no,” she answered.

“What does it say?”

“Nothing important. Forget it.”

“Let me take a look. Maybe I can recognize the handwrit--”

“Never mind!”

“Whatever!” Friesen shot back, tossing a ten-dollar bill onto Lois’ desk. “Here. I got ‘radioactive mutation’!”

“Jimmy already has radioac--” she exclaimed, but Friesen was already on his way to the water cooler where he would most likely linger for a half hour.

He may be annoying, Lois thought, flicking the note with an agitated finger, *but he had a good idea. The handwriting!* For the rest of the day, she went about finding excuses to take a look at the scribbled records of every male employee on the floor - from the copy boys to Jimmy Olsen to the little round man who sat by the copy machine to the Editor-in-Chief himself. No one’s handwriting matched. No one’s! *Except for . . .*

“Hi, Clark,” she said, as the bespectacled reporter came back from a trip to the press room. Kent returned the greeting, dropped his notepad on his desk, and sat.

“Get everything cleared up down there?” she asked, hoping that her interest played for real.

“I think so,” Kent replied. “If Congressman Kaye would just quit altering his statements--”

“Kent!” the Editor’s voice burst from his doorway. “Kaye recanted the whole thing! Get in here!”

Kent jumped up from his seat and darted to White’s office, leaving Lois to eye his lonely notepad. It lay in the middle of his desk blotter enticing her feverish curiosity. *Could it be him?* He was always so serious. Besides his extended bathroom trips, he seemed entirely engulfed in his work. Yet occasionally she caught him looking at her out of the corner of his eye. *You know what they say about still waters . . .*

She rose and, subtly glancing around for snoops, eased over to Kent’s desk. With a quick flick, she tossed open the notepad cover and placed the mysterious note beside the heavily scrawled page.

“Well!” she grunted. The comparison was obvious. The two handwritings did not resemble each other in the least. Finally, no one - *absolutely NO ONE* - in the city room, or who normally had access to the city room, was responsible for the note.

Now she was free to dream. Dropping back in her chair, she envisioned a god in red-and-blue becoming invisible and slipping the piece of paper under her phone or . . . *Maybe he can stop time*, she thought, with a smile, *and walked in here while everyone just stood around like statues. Perhaps he stroked my hair . . . and gently kissed my cheek.* She held the note tight, never letting go for the rest of the day. For the dream would be over if she released it, she feared - the Caped Wonder would not come.

Tonight at eight. Your place. A Friend. She took every free moment to read it again and again, until, not only the words, but every fiber of the paper was seared into her mind - even overlaying the glittering stars as she gazed up from her midtown apartment balcony, seventeen stories above Winkler Street. Thinking of the tender touch of his mighty arm around her waist, she recalled her romance of fairy tale heroes nurtured by the books Gramma Anna gave little Lois for her

trips from Russellville back to the homey towers of Metropolis. The child huddled in the big, vinyl train seat and devoured the exciting words and pictures that spurred her fantasies.

Perhaps little Lois plunged in too deep. *What a ninny I was!* The girl looked up from her crisply-new volume of “King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table”. Taking a few moments to envision Galahad in battle with the Green Knight, she glanced out the window, and saw . . . *a boy on foot racing past the speeding locomotive!*

“Mama!” she screeched, nudging her mother from the engulfing world of the new Harold Robbins best seller.

The woman did not take her eyes from the pages. “What is it, sweetheart?”

“Look! There’s a . . .” But Lois never finished the sentence. Tugging at her mother’s sleeve, she looked back out the window. The running boy was gone. “Forget it.”

“Do you need to potty?”

“No. I’m okay.”

The child sat back in her seat and, before diving back to Camelot, she swore, from that point on, she would master the written word - the written word would never again master her.

“Good evening, Miss Lane.”

Startled, Lois whisked around. Beyond the rows of potted lilies and roses, her brightly uniformed savior alighted on the terrace wall. *I probably should say ‘Hello’.* But her lower lip just drooped as she gazed at his powerful frame: *My God, Michelangelo’s David is Quasimodo compared to this guy!*

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Were you about to go out?” This struck Lois as an odd thing for him to say until - *I’m an idiot!* - she recalled the designer gown with the silky wrap she had squeezed into just for the occasion. “Oh, this ol’ thing . . .”

“It’s no trouble for me to come back another time.”

“Stay right where you are!” she shouted, darting toward him. “Please, don’t fly away.”

Smiling broadly, the man dropped down onto the terrace floor. “Thanks for letting me stop by. I realize there must be many questions about me that the world would like answers to . . .”

“Sure,” she said, gesturing with a flourish to the white enameled patio dining set that she had spent an hour after work polishing. “Thank you for thinking of me.”

“My pleasure,” the man responded, strolling to the dining set and easing into his seat.

Eyeing him keenly, Lois sighed. *Good grief. He's just as graceful on his feet as he is in the air. His soles barely touch the floor, and his body . . . his body does not jolt with his steps. Does gravity not affect this man at all?* She sat in the chair across from him where her note pad and pencil awaited her. "Let's start with your vitals. Your height?"

"Six-four," he answered, simply.

"Weight?"

He thought for a moment, then shook his head. "Scales and I don't get along too well."

"Yes," Lois sympathized. "I guess when you can defy gravity . . ."

"We might talk in terms of mass, but that wouldn't interest anyone but a handful of university professors."

"Well, then . . ." She felt warmth sweep over her face as she glanced up from her pad to contact his crystal blue gaze. Never had she reacted to a man this way. She had interviewed famous scientists, heads of state, great writers, but none presented the tiniest iota of the charisma that the Caped Wonder emitted with a blink. "Are the rest of your bodily functions what we'd consider . . . uh . . . normal?" *What am I trying to ask him?* Could the blush of her face that was rapidly working its way down her body be controlling her mouth? *Get a handle on it, girl!*

"Pardon?"

"Do you . . ." *Think fast!* ". . . eat?"

"Sure. When I'm hungry."

Lois laughed, imagining herself holding a pistol to her head and suddenly lunging out of the way as she pulled the trigger. "'When I'm hungry'," she quoted as she wrote. "I'm just like that, too."

"I'm certain we have a lot in common, Miss Lane."

My goodness! Pad in hand, she sprang from her seat and coyly ambled over to the terrace garden. "Call me Lois . . . please." She turned back just to see him rise, smiling, and walk toward her. Her mind raced quickly to come up with another question. *I can't just stand here and stare into those eyes . . . That's it!* "I hear you can see through anything. Is that right?"

"Pretty much," he replied, stopping before the planter of white roses that separated them.

X-ray vision, eh? As a reporter she needed to control the conversation, and she was losing it. *Maybe I can embarrass him a little . . .* "What color is my underwear?"

Looking downward, the man's brow furrowed. "Hmm . . ."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I haven't made you uncomfortable, have I?"

"Oh, no," he answered, running his hand along the edge of the planter between them. "I seem to be having trouble right now."

"Oh." *Well, well . . . who's got the upper hand now. X-ray vision? Right! Maybe this Man of Steel isn't all he claims to be.* She scribbled down his response as she sauntered back to the table. "So . . . do you have a name?"

"You mean a title, like Captain or--"

"No. Like Ralph or--"

"Pink."

She spun on her heels. "Pardon?" *What kind of name is . . . ?* Her hero's wry expression answered her question. *My underwear!* She slapped her notepad over her lap, unconsciously hoping that he could not see through 25# bond paper either. *Me and my big--*

"You don't have to worry," he informed her. "I won't look again."

"Promise?"

"I never lie."

She wrote that down and circled it. "That's good to know."

The man kept his distance, but smiled warmly. He leaned back against the planter and awaited another question.

"Where do you hail from?"

"I'm from a planet on the other side of the galaxy. A world called Krypton."

Lois could not believe how matter-of-factly he delivered that extraordinary fact. "Krypton? Really? You're an alien?"

His eyes narrowed. "What's wrong? You don't believe me?"

"Oh, no," she sparked. "I just lost the office pool is all. Ten bucks down the tube. I figured you for a government-created super soldier."

"Sorry if I disappointed you."

"No! Goodness, no! Alien or whatever, you're just . . ." She made the mistake of looking him directly in the eye again and lost track of her words. *Even from this distance his gaze is so . . . so . . . What was I saying? He must think I'm an idiot.* Then it occurred to her: *What if he can*

read my mind and he hasn't told me. Then, he knows I'm an idiot!

"Do you have any more questions?" he asked, patiently.

Questions? Right. I gotta ask him a-- "So you fly, do you?" What was that? It sure as heck wasn't a question! He doesn't need to be clairvoyant to know I'm a basketcase now. Why didn't I just say: "Pardon my lobotomy, but . . ."

"You know I do."

"How fast . . . can you fly?"

The Caped Wonder looked up into the sky and took a deep breath. *Oh, no*, Lois panicked. *He's given up on me. He's about to take off.*

"Good question," he said.

Really?

"I've never timed myself." The man whisked up to Lois. "Let's find out."

"What? Me fly?"

"Well, I'll be doing the flying, but why don't you come for a ride? I've been told I'm an E ticket." He curled his arm around her waist.

Oh my . . . She swooned. She thought she would never be capable of swooning. Not Lois Lane. Was she some silly, Victorian ninny? *Never!* That is, not until a titan appeared from the heavens and embraced her. "You know," she said, settling into his chest and allowing her pad and pencil to fall to the floor, "despite everything in the papers and on television, many people think you're no more real than . . . Peter Pan."

"Peter Pan flew with children," he said, with a flirtatious wink.

I feel like a child.

The man raised his free arm as if pointing to the stars, and Lois felt the floor fall away beneath her feet.

"All right, Wendy . . ." he said, as the chilled night sky enveloped them. "Think happy thoughts."

Earth and space spun around them, street lights blending with constellations. They leveled, and below she saw the familiar map of dotted lights that was her beloved city. Forty-eighth street whipped by, then Sixty-second, Ninety-fourth, Klein Square, One hundred-thirty-third, the bay

marina. The lights below became dim, now only quivering reflections of the stars on the tormented ocean. Light ahead stung her eyes. Crimson slashed the horizon and swelled like a gaping wound. *How could the sun be rising? It's not even nine p.m. yet.* The sun blazed over new land, lush and green. It zipped below as another city appeared. Looking for clues, a famous clock tower caught her eye. *Big Ben!*

Finally, she put the brake to her reeling mind. *We've traveled thousands of miles in seconds. I should be dead!* She looked to her pilot's smiling face with thought of asking him how this could be; How could she be rocketing through the air without being burned up by the friction? *That's what should happen, right? I should be a cinder now.* Yet the cool assurance of his gaze soothed her fear.

She was in the arms of a god. *No harm can ever come to me here.* Snuggling in as tight as she could, Lois breathed deep and took it all in.

Below, Asia gave way to the darkening Pacific.

"We're crossing over the West Coast," he whispered in her ear.

She caught glimpses of mountains, rivers, and lakes washed in moonlight. Clusters of lights marked cities after cities - until the illuminated map of her dear Metropolis approached, their speed slowing and their course descending.

Her brightly lit terrace shot up beneath them, and, without the slightest shock, they landed.

"I forgot to keep track of the time," the Caped Wonder said, letting her go. "How about you?"

"Uh . . . no," she said, stumbling as she gathered up her pad and pencil. "But that's okay. I'll just write 'pretty darn fast'."

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Fine."

"Well, I'd better go."

"Stop!" she shouted, seeing that her notepad pages were practically blank. "I've got so much more to ask you."

Grinning, he snatched the tablet and pencil from her hands and, with blinding speed, pencil blurring as pages rattled, the man from Krypton filled the pad with neatly scrawled text.

"There, Lois," he said, "everything you'll want to know."

Amazed again, she took back the pad and flipped through the fifty pages. *His punctuation is even perfect!*

A phrase on the final page startled her into a hiccup. “You’ve come to ‘fight for Truth, Justice, and the American Way’,” she said. “That’s quite a motto!”

“It’s a promise.”

“You think you can live up to it?”

“Watch me.” Without another hesitation, he sprang into the night and was gone.

“Good bye . . . my friend,” Lois whispered to herself, realizing that she had never learned his name. She rifled through the notes. He had gone into minute explanation as to his home world, his goals, his dedication to the people of Earth, and even the meaning behind the S-like emblem on his uniform, but he never gave his name. *They’re calling him all sorts of things - the Caped Wonder, the Metropolis Marvel - but none do him justice, none will stick. I’m going to name him for good. He’s not just marvelous. He’s not just wondrous. He’s . . . he’s . . .* Her mind latched onto that unworldly crest - that blazing red S: *He’s super . . . Yes, he’s . . .*

An hour past dawn, the sun peaking through the skyscrapers, Clark Kent walked up from the subway platform and stopped at a news stand. He grabbed up a copy of the sunrise edition of the Daily Planet to read the headline:

MY EVENING WITH SUPERMAN

by
Lois Lane

He chuckled quietly. *Superman?* He began reading and chuckled some more. The article that stretched over the entire front page and continued onto page three was incredibly flattering. One could easily question Lois’ objectivity, especially when it came to the moniker she had given him. “Where did she come up with that?” he whispered to himself, as he thought back to her expression as she gazed at him during their around-the-world flight. Her face was full of the charm of wonder and surprise, and more important, the beauty of trust. *As far as she knew I might have crushed her or dropped her at my whim. She could have kicked and screamed, yet she didn’t. She rested in my embrace and trusted me. You have named me, Lois, and I will live up to the title. My path has been set and your faith eases my journey. For you I will be SUPERMAN!*

“Ain’t no li-berry, bub,” said the trollish clerk. “Gonna pay for that?”

“Yes, sir.” Clark handed him a dollar. “Keep the change.”

“Hey, you must be havin’ a great morning.”

“They don’t come any better.” Smiling, Clark headed off to work.

Chapter Eight

“Villainous Ways”

“ . . . in that location he mentions . . .” Luthor muttered to himself, as he entered figures into the calculating machine beside the plush divan. “. . . And its proximity to our own solar system.” He pressed a final button. The gadget whirled and clicked like baseball cards in the spokes of a bicycle wheel, then stopped abruptly with a chime and spat out a strip of printed paper. “Amazing,” he exclaimed, anxiously absorbing the results. “Too good to be true!”

“Yeah. It’s too good to be true,” Miss Teschmacher agreed, running her moist tongue along her glossy lower lip as she read the article in the Daily Planet. “He’s six foot-four. Has black hair, blue eyes. Doesn’t drink. Doesn’t smoke. And tells the truth!”

“What a guy!” Otis exclaimed, peering over the woman’s shoulder like a panting hound dog.

Luthor shook his head with wry disgust. “Miss Teschmacher, some people can read ‘War and Peace’ and come away thinking it’s a simple adventure story. Others can read the ingredients on a chewing gum wrapper and unlock the secrets of the Universe.”

“Lex!” she scoffed. “What does chewing gum got to do with the secrets of the--”

“Right, Miss Teschmacher,” he patronized, silencing her inanity. “It’s reasonable to conclude,” he then spouted, arrogantly, “that fragments of the planet followed in the magnetic wake of the ship that brought him to Earth, landing here in 1951.” He strolled to the book shelves and plucked out an old issue of National Geographic.

This “ridiculous freak” in the red cape, both astounded Luthor and revolted him. He marveled at the alien’s great powers. What he would give to have them himself! *Such a waste*, he thought. *In a single day the Kryptonian could convert the whole world into his own empire. Instead he stops bank robberies and saves cats from trees. He says he wants to fight for Truth, Justice, and what? . . . The American Way? What World War II bond drive did he jump out of, anyway?* This combination of power and humility struck Luthor as unnatural. *If the powerful spend all their energy helping the lesser element through their mundane lives how will we elite evolve into gods!*

He heard himself: *We* elite? His brow furrowed with the notion. *We*? Until the alien took to the skies, Luthor had been secure in his destiny. His outrageous brilliance had assured him his place as the ruler of the world, which he would take piece by piece. *As famous and feared as numbskulls like Napoleon, Alexander, and Genghis Kahn were, my potential greatness cannot be in doubt.* As a child, a school counselor had called Luthor's confidence 'megalomania'! Little Lex knew that it was just a big word spewed from a small mind. He was top dog, no doubt about it.

Now competition soared out of the sky and the Daily Planet called him Superman! A figure by whose very philosophy was a road block to his fate. They said he was a Man of Steel, indestructible, but that was nonsense. The Greeks said the same of Achilles. Everyone has a weakness, Luthor knew. Even Supermen.

"Meteorites!" Otis exclaimed.

"Very good," Luthor responded.

"I know I'm gonna get rapped in the mouth for this," Miss Teschmacher groaned, "but so what?"

"You mean," her boss said, running his finger down the National Geographic's table of contents, "to us they are mere rocks from space. Fair enough. However, you're not taking into account the Delphinian Theory."

His two underlings exchanged confused glances.

"The Del-*what*-ian Theory?" Miss Teschmacher questioned.

"The Delphinian Theory of reverse effects," Luthor answered, flipping through the magazine's pages. "Elements that would be harmless to him in their own environment, when transposed to our Earth, have the reverse effect. The ambient radiation emitted by those elements on his home world become dangerous to him on our world . . . even lethal. Here we are." On page fifty-two was a full page photograph of an Ethiopian scientist holding a rock the size of a loaf of bread. He ripped the leaf from the spine and tossed it to his minions, who huddled together to see what the fuss was about. "Voila!"

"You mean fire and bullets can't hurt this guy, but . . ." Otis pondered, scratching at his head.

"But this stuff can *kill him*!" Miss Teschmacher exclaimed.

"Right," Luthor confirmed, smiling as he plopped down into his velvet armchair. "Doesn't it give you a shutter of electricity just to be in the same room with me?"

"Ha!" Miss Teschmacher yelped. "It's nothing like the shutter you're gonna get when you try to lay that thing on him. He'll see you from miles away."

"Oh, Lord," Luthor mocked, gesturing heavenward. "You give them eyes but they cannot see."

Leaning in at his cohorts, he spoke as if delivering the moral to a fable. “And neither can he . . . through lead!”

Otis slapped himself on the forehead and Miss Teschmacher frantically jumped up and down as they shouted in unison: “Lead!”

Luthor waved them to silence. “Miss Teschmacher, arrange for three seats on the first flight tomorrow to Addis Ababa. One first class and two coach.”

Picking up the phone, Miss Teschmacher wondered over what the stylish woman in Ethiopia wore that time of year, while Otis eagerly pondered the delight of the plane trip: “Mmm, honey-roasted peanuts!”

Luthor yawned as he peered through the binoculars. Even geniuses can suffer from jet-lag. Still, he would not let it keep him from keenly carrying out his task or supervising the duties of his cohorts. Less than sixteen hours since arriving at the Portland International Airport straight from Addis Ababa, the mastermind stood outside Ontario, Oregon on a cliff overlooking the Snake River that separated him from Idaho. A cool breeze rustling the reddish curls of his newly-purchased wig, he carefully watched the performance being staged before him.

A few hundred yards beyond the bridge, an overturned car lay smashed in the center of the highway. Luthor’s fair-haired assistant lay spread eagle on the pavement. She was adorned in a slim-fitting, crimson evening gown.

“Lex,” she had said, as he picked out the dress for her, “we’ll be out in the middle of nowhere. Where on Earth would I be wearing this to?”

“Trust me, my dear,” he answered. “That won’t cross their minds.” Now, witnessing through magnified lenses her heaving bosom stretch the thin fabric, he knew how right he was.

A convoy of ten US Army vehicles chugged steadily over the bridge. The primary feature was the long flatbed truck with a massive cargo, a huge, cylindrical load secured beneath a tarpaulin.

Luthor shifted his gaze to see Otis behind a clump of bushes waiting to do his part. *Please . . . please . . .* he thought, *. . . please . . . pleasepleasepleaseplease don’t blow it, Otis!*

The last truck drove off the bridge: Luthor’s cue!

He jumped into the stolen ambulance that sat ambling, threw on the siren, and roared down the dirt road to the highway. After crossing the bridge and three rocking curves, he found them stopped - just as planned - beside the staged accident. Screeching to a halt, he jumped out,

medical case in hand, and joined the circle of soldiers that surrounded the seemingly-unconscious victim. “Did you folks call for an ambulance?”

As Luthor crouched down and began simulating emergency procedures, Miss Teschmacher’s lips moved ever so slightly. “How are we doing?” she whispered.

He furtively glanced at his watch. “Right on schedule,” he whispered back, seeing, out of the corner of his eye, Otis dash out of the shrubs, sneak up onto the flatbed truck, and slide under the tarpaulin.

“There he is!” Miss Teschmacher squealed.

Luthor shut off the siren and pulled over to the shoulder. The Army convoy was back on its way, and he and his surprisingly chipper casualty riding shotgun had rounded the bend and was out of their sight. Otis, jubilant as a five-year-old on Christmas morning, bounded out of the roadside brush and jumped in the back of the ambulance.

“I did it!” he exclaimed, scampering up between the two front seats. “I did it, Mr. Loo-thor!”

“Good,” Luthor said, studying his henchman’s face in the rearview mirror. “Not that I don’t trust you, Otis . . .” He took a breath and realized there was no point in lying. “Okay, I *don’t* trust you. What did you do?”

“I did just like you told me,” he said, gleefully. “I got into the onboard whatchamacallit . . .”

“The directional computer?” his boss hissed, impatiently.

“Yeah. I set the first . . . uh . . . vector . . . to thirty-eight,” Otis sputtered, looking at the palm of his right hand.

“Yes.”

“The second one to sixty-seven . . .”

“Uh-huh.”

“And the third one to 117!” Otis laughed with pride.

Luthor turned in his seat and glared Otis in the eye. “What about the fourth vector?”

The rotund man’s mouth plopped open. “Fourth, Mr. Loo-thor?”

“You idiot, the third vector was supposed to be eleven and the fourth seven!”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Mr. Loo-thor. You, see . . . I wrote the numbers on my hand and I guess it wasn’t big enough, so I kind of pushed the numbers toge--”

“Oh, really! Your hand’s too small, is it?” Luthor barked. “How’d you like to see a really big hand?” Before Otis grasped the meaning, he was struck flat in the face, knocking him on his butt.

“Lex!” Miss Teschmacher shouted, holding him back from going after the goon more brutally. “There’s another missile!”

Luthor slumped in his seat and gritted his teeth. *How does the greatest criminal mind of the twentieth century wind up surrounding himself with imbeciles?* he asked himself. Then he thought back over all the competent crooks he had left for dead when schemes went awry, or had fed to the police to escape arrest. He could no longer be picky.

“You’re right, Miss Teschmacher,” he said, pulling the road map from the glove compartment. “There is another missile - and this time you get the honors.”

Under a corner of her desk blotter, Lois kept a picture of her Superman. She had clipped it from the edition that first announced him. It was blurred, as were all his photographs. Not being one to hang around for “photo ops”, he came, did what needed to be done, and took off. Nonetheless, as imperfect as it was, Lois gazed at the picture often, taking moments through the day to lift the corner and look at the image on the slowly browning newsprint. *I should have had it laminated.* At first, she snuck peeks, embarrassed by her fascination. However, after her exclusive whirlwind of an interview, her secretive glances extended into loving gazes. “It’s not like he’s Shaun Cassidy,” she defended herself to Friesen. “He’s like a Greek God.” *Right! Greek Gods ain’t got nothing on him!* She considered clipping another picture and putting it in a little frame, but she would never get any work done. So her furtive looks continued. In fact, she had the blotter curled up as the phone rang.

“Lois Lane,” she declared. “Let’s hear it.”

The voice on the line was hushed. In the background she could hear jabber, laughing, and the clatter of silverware and glasses. He did not give his name. He did not need to. Speaking only a single word, he introduced himself. The word was “gold”.

“Go ahead,” she said.

Her informant, a South American business man who dabbled in dubious affairs, told her of a gold sale. The nation of Delgado had purchased twelve million American dollars worth from a

mysterious source. This was the third such deal this year. He had just snuck away from a conversation with some acquaintances who had overseen the transactions to three third-world countries.

“They revealed something very interesting, Senorita Lane . . . *very* interesting.”

Lois and he had an understanding. With each bit of information he provided her, she sent him some American-made products that were difficult to get south of the equator. “Understood,” she said.

“They just told me when they received the bullion for the sale, it was embossed with the seal of the United States. The dealer had them melt it down and re-mold the bars with a new emblem . . .”

“Yes?”

“The new emblem was a laurel wreath surrounding a set of initials . . .”

“Quit dragging this out. What were the initials?”

The man snickered. “The initials were . . . ‘L. L.’” He burst out laughing, then stifled himself from attracting attention. “What are you up to down here, Senorita?”

“Right,” she groaned. “I’ve got trouble buying you your Twinkies.”

L. L., she pondered, hanging up. Something gnawed at her from that morning - something other than her monogrammed towels. She tugged the morning’s teletype printout from beneath her ‘In’ box. There it was. Fourth item down. The Associated Press reported that acreage, running into the hundreds of thousands, was being bought up by an obscure organization calling itself “L.L., Inc.”

Lex Luthor?

“Jimmy!” she called over the ruckus of the city room.

“What?” he sparked, looming right behind her.

Startled, she spun in her chair. “Jimmy you gotta stop . . . !” She caught her breath. “Go home and pack a bag. We’re going to California.”

“What’s in California?”

“You’ll know soon enough. Hop to it!”

As the boy rushed off, Lois wracked her brain about how she could convince the Chief that a city

beat reporter should cover this national story.

A quarter to noon, the clock said. Even on the busiest day, Clark passingly saw Lois at least two or three times by lunch. But, today, he had not yet caught a glimpse of her. He enjoyed those secretive glances. They took him to those minutes high in the stratosphere circling the planet - their gaze meeting - a bond forming. Yet, across the city room or passing in the hall, her small nods and polite smiles were not for her Superman, but for Clark. *Someone she respects*, he thought. *Does she know how I feel?* His cheeks would warm as their eyes made contact. *Surely, she can see me blush. How odd it would be if she realized that the glow was from her Kryptonian.*

Sometimes the illusion irked him - the illusion that Clark Kent and Superman were two different people. *I'm deceiving her. I'm deceiving everyone. Or am I? In a way I am two different people: What my abilities insist me to be and what I need to be in spite of them. It's for the good of the whole human race; So said Jor-El, and his wisdom is clear. But when may I reveal myself to her? Can I ever?*

What would become of that trustful look that meant so much?

"Where's Lois?" he asked Bill Friesen, as he past by his desk.

Friesen looked up from his typewriter. "Perry sent her out west to cover a story in California. She took the Olsen kid with her."

"KENT!" howled Perry White, from his office door. Obediently, Kent rushed over to him. "I got a story for you."

"But, Mr. White, I'm right in the middle of--"

"That'll wait. This just came over the wire: Somebody has made a threat against the city, claiming he has a nerve gas pellet that can wipe out the entire population. He claims to have it set on a timer in the sub-basement of the Swanderson building. The police aren't saying when it's supposed to go off. My guess is soon - very soon. The bomb squad and Henderson's task force should be arriving there as I speak."

"Who's responsible?" Kent asked, grabbing his overcoat from the rack.

White shook his head and cleared his throat. "Thank God, Lane ain't here. I'd have to listen to a half-hour of 'I-told-ya-so'!"

"Pardon?"

The Editor sighed. “He’s calling himself . . . *Lex Luthor*.”

Chapter Nine

“Invulnerable?”

Peering skyward, the crowd swarming at the police barrier before the Swanderson Building roared.

“Look!” shouted a young police officer guarding the front entrance. “It’s the Caped Wonder!”

His partner, shielding his eyes as he glared upward, shook his head. “They call him Superman now, dummy.”

The Kryptonian alighted on the walk in front of them. “Mind if I come in?”

Smiling, the cops threw open the doors, allowing the hero from the sky to saunter in.

“Superman! Superman!” the citizens cried.

In the lobby, a trio of officers rushed up to meet him, gas masks muffling their praises. They led him down two flights of stairs to the lower level, where they introduced him to their commander. She was a tall policewoman, her gas mask pushed up so she could talk into her two-way radio. “How’s it going, Captain Sawyer?” the Kryptonian asked.

“We’ve found what appears to be the device,” she said, holstering the radio. “It’s just where his letter said it would be. If this isn’t a crock, it’s set to go off in less than three minutes.”

“Are you trying to defuse it?”

“We’re having trouble penetrating the casing.”

Superman nodded. “Do you mind if I take a look?”

“Please!” The Captain escorted him through an open door into a dimly-lit boiler room. An arm-length metallic cylinder sat alone in a corner, the stacks of crates that had once concealed it pushed to one side. The vent intended to suck the gas through and out of the building loomed just overhead. “It doesn’t appear to be touch-sensitive,” Sawyer explained.

“Clear the room,” Superman ordered.

At Sawyer’s call, the other officers in the room scrambled out, the caped man pushing the door closed behind them.

The Man of Steel glared at the cylinder. His sight could not penetrate it. Kneeling and gently grasping it in both hands, he raised the object just inches from his face. His brow knit, and his lids flexed. With a scarlet burst, two fiery beams shot from his eyes, slicing through an end of the cylinder like a can opener.

“Jeepers Creepers! Where’d ya get those peepers?” Miss Teschmacher hooted, tunefully, peering over her boss’s shoulder.

“His eyes are like welder’s torches!” Otis howled, his head hanging over Luthor’s other shoulder.

“A hundred - no - a *thousand* times better than that,” Luthor said, studying the monitor that displayed the secret transmission. “He’s able to concentrate the extraordinary energy of his x-ray vision into beams that make the most powerful manufactured laser look like a squirt gun.”

“This guy’s amazing,” Otis said.

“Indeed,” Luthor responded, with a contradictory shake of his head. “However, not surprisingly, you miss the point. What is important is not that he’s cutting into the casing with beams from his eyes . . . ”

“It’s not?”

“What is important is that he’s *having* to cut it open to see what’s inside.” Otis and Miss Teschmacher gasped with burgeoning comprehension as the villain continued: “The titanium shell is lined with lead. He can’t see through lead just as he told the Daily Planet.”

“He never lies,” Miss Teschmacher reminded.

“Apparently,” Luthor condescended. “The flying boy scout is too honest for his own good.”

The freshly hewn lid, with its edges glowing, fell and clattered on the concrete floor. Superman looked in the opening. Empty.

“Can I help you find something?”

The voice came from inside his head. From the spot between his eyes. Was it Jor-El? The CrystalMind?

With a clank of metal against metal, doors, set chest-high in each of the surrounding walls, dropped open - *What the heck?* - revealing blazing machine gun nozzles from all four directions. Rapid fire shot slug after slug, ricocheting off him. Superman shook his head in disgust. *What a waste of--* “Yowch!”

“Got it,” Luthor sang, halting the video tape as it recorded. “You saw that, didn’t you, children?”

“He flinched,” Miss Teschmacher said, surprised.

“That tiny little flinch is all I hoped for,” he said, rewinding the tape frame-by-frame, working his way back to the moment Superman shuddered. “There we are.” Frozen on the screen, the enemy’s shoulder was raised and his face contorted. Looking at the control-track readout, he made a quick calculation, then slipped a folded bit of paper from his pocket, a note prepared for him by Miss Teschmacher as she loaded the guns. “Number two,” he whispered to himself, “thirty-six.” He unfolded the paper.

The note read: “Machine gun 2. Bullet 36.”

“Yes!” he shouted, jumping up and punching the air.

“What? What?” Otis exclaimed.

“That was it,” Luthor said, as Miss Teschmacher hugged him and kissed him on his bald pate.

Otis continued to bounce excitedly, anxiety twisting his face. “I don’t get it.”

“The thirty-sixth bullet in the second machine gun ” Luthor instructed, “contained a fragment of the meteorite. It hurt him!”

The henchman’s face exploded with understanding. “It hurt him!”

Luthor dropped back into his chair and fixed his eyes on another of his monitors. He watched the two tampered missiles launch from a pair of silos at a secret desert military base. They rose high . . . higher . . . higher into the sky. Then, he threw back his head in a fiercely satisfied laugh as the missiles took surprising turns.

Superman rubbed at his shoulder. The twinge had already passed. *Pain?* he wondered. How could one of hundreds of bullets cause this irritation?

“Allow me to introduce myself,” the voice returned. “I am Lex Luthor.”

Luthor! Superman scanned the room and spotted the tiny camera tucked between two rusty pipes.

“Only one thing alive on less than four legs can hear this frequency and that’s you. As you’ve noticed, I’ve misled you a bit about the nerve gas pellet. I have it. If you don’t want me to use it, you’ll have to come to me.”

Pounding came at the door. “Superman!” Captain Sawyer shouted. “What’s going on in there?”

“I know, it all seems a bit much, but how else was I going to meet you,” Luthor said. “You’d never accept an invitation to tea.”

The door swung back open. Sawyer and her men peered in through the waning gunsmoke. “Superman?”

“I’ve got to go,” the Kryptonian said. He sprang and shot up through the ceiling.

Wood, metal, and plaster burst again and again and again until he was out in the open air, swooping up over the city.

“A disaster with people in danger - people who need help,” Luthor continued, much to Kal-El’s mounting anger. “I just knew you couldn’t resist the chance to pitch in.”

His cape snapping as he ripped through the air, swerving around one skyscraper after another, Superman followed the villain’s signal like a cheetah on the scent of an antelope.

“There’s a strong steak of good in you, Superman . . .”

The intensity of the signal peaked. He looked down and saw Union Station.

“ . . . but then, nobody’s perfect.”

He plunged.

“*Almost* nobody.” Luthor chuckled.

The pedestrians coursing before the Station saw their hero coming. Before the people had a chance to start their outcries, he shouted “Look out!” blasting like a bullhorn. They scattered from his target - the concrete walk before the main entrance. “Thank you!” he said, and spun with such speed that his red and blue form blurred into a sharp purple drill. With a thundering blast, he tore into the walk. Concrete shards and earthen clods flew up in a flurry. Eight, nine, ten feet, he cut - then, he struck air.

He stopped and his feet smacked metal, discovering himself on a catwalk suspended over a river of sewage. At the far end was a door. A vault door. Luthor’s broadcast was over, but he heard

another voice come from beyond: "I think he's comin', Mr. Loo-thor."

Whisking down the catwalk, Superman plowed through the locked entry, knocking the thick slab of metal to the floor within. He stood in the torn threshold and saw that his forceful entrance had done damage to an elaborately decorated chamber. Too elaborate. The bad taste coated his tongue.

"The door's open. Come in," Luthor said.

Behind a wingback chair huddled a heavyset man - the thug he recognized instantly as his incompetent mugger. The words did not come from him. The bearer of the voice was further into the room, seated behind an ornately-carved, wooden desk, bedecked by knickknacks. The objects were of all sizes. They were of gold and silver, wood and stone, tin and plastic. Few of the things were whole. Mostly they were broken. Pieces detached from the scenes of his crimes, with no value but to his vanity. *Treasures of his conceit*, Kal-El reasoned. *Gifts to his ego*. The rest of the room was not so subtle, his loot displayed in a museum of depravity. *He doesn't fear revealing himself. So . . . either he is a fool . . . or he is as dangerous as the situation would have it.*

Seated comfortably in a plush velvet chair while boldly dressed in pin-striped blazer and emerald ascot, Luthor had a surprisingly friendly face. A smile that did not seem so much devious as impish. His smooth scalp shone from the overhead light. *Polished up real nice*, Superman realized. *The halo is no accident.*

"My attorney will be in touch with you about the door," the villain said. "Otis, take the gentleman's cape."

The plump henchman rose slowly from his crouch, took an unsteady step forward, then stopped. "I - I don't think he wants me to, Mr. Loo-thor."

"Of course," the bald man reasoned, wryly. "The outfit just doesn't work without it."

His tone low, Superman spoke impatiently: "Where's the gas pellet?"

Luthor chuckled. "In the back of my mind, actually. Just a little idea I was toying with."

The Kryptonian was neither amused nor relieved. His brow creased as he considered his enemy. "Is that how a warped brain like yours gets its kicks - by planning the deaths of innocent people?"

"No," Luthor answered, with quiet pride. "By *causing* the deaths of innocent people."

Glancing at his watch, he jumped to his feet. "Otis, the presentation!" The fat man darted out of the chamber, while his master sauntered around the desk, beckoning for the hero to follow.

"You're not going to believe what I actually have planned." Luthor, grabbing a wooden pointer from off the desk, led Superman to the area of the old railway station furnished as a garish living

room. There, a tripod was set up.

“You’re trying my patience,” Superman said.

“Please, indulge me. I do so need my visual aids,” Luthor quipped, as Otis rushed in carrying a stack of placards. “Now, as you may or may not know, I am very heavy into real estate. To make money in that game you have to buy for a little and sell for a lot.”

The oafish assistant set the placards on the tripod. The one facing outward bore a familiar sight, the map of the United States of America.

“Problem: How to make the land more valuable between the time you buy it and the time you sell it,” Luthor said, as he stepped up to the display and indicated part of the map. “Now, this is California, the richest, most populace state in the Union--.”

“I don’t need a geography lesson from you,” Superman insisted.

“Of course not,” Luthor condescended, with a smile. “I forget, you *do* get around, don’t you? How about the San Andreas Fault? Have you heard of that?”

Somewhere in the back of the Kryptonian’s mind, Clark Kent was shouting: “Luthor, you pompous jackass, I learned this all by sixth grade!” However, maintaining the Man of Steel’s mystery, he replied as if quoting from a freshly-read text book: “It’s the joining together of two land masses. The fault line is unstable and shifting, which is why you get earthquakes in California from time to time.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself,” the bald man smirked. At the snap of the mastermind’s fingers, his henchman removed the U.S. map, revealing, on the next card, a close up illustration of the state in question. As he slid the tip of his pointer along the jagged red streak that split the state lengthwise down the middle, Luthor announced: “Everything west of this line is the richest, most expensive real estate in the world - San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco. Everything on the other side is just hundreds and hundreds of miles of worthless, desert land - which is now owned entirely by . . .” He swatted Otis with the pointer.

Cued, the fat man blurted: “Lex Luthor, Esq., secret board member of L.L., Inc.”

“And the *only* board member,” Luthor explained. Again, he snapped his fingers and Otis revealed the next card, an identical map of California with a black ‘X’ along the fault line. “Now, call me foolish, call me irresponsible . . . it occurs to me that if a conventional nuclear bomb - five megatons or so - were to explode at exactly the proper stress point . . .” With his pointer, he tapped at the X. “. . . it would trigger an upheaval that would--”

“Kill millions of people!” Superman exclaimed, shifting his jaw in heightening anger. “The West Coast as we know it would--”

“Drop into the sea,” Luthor laughed. “Bye-bye, California. Hello, new West Coast. *My* West

Coast.” Snap! Otis exposed another card: A much skinnier California with a handful of new cities spotted along the shore, with names’ like Marina Del Lex, San Luthor Obispo, and . . . Lexaheim. “Yes, Lexaheim,” he chortled, “where I’ll build LUTHORLAND. I’m going to have rides that make the Matterhorn look like a playground teeter-totter.”

“The kids won’t wear mouse ears. They’ll wear little bald caps!” Otis added.

“For the last time, Otis,” Luthor barked, “you’re *not* an idea man!”

The Kryptonian shook his head in disgust. “And you’re a dreamer, Luthor. A sick, twisted dreamer.”

“Am I?” the mastermind asked, slyly, and cried out: “Miss Teschmacher!”

In response, his blond paramour appeared from around a corner, neatly dressed in a cream chiffon dress. Kal-El judged by the way she fidgeted that this was not her usual style. The swimming eyes and blushing cheeks told him that she meant the outfit for a special occasion, Perhaps a special guest. “Yes, Lex?” she said, while smiling at their tall visitor.

“Where is the rocket now?”

“The one missile is flying like a bat out of Hell over the Grand Canyon!”

Luthor grinned at his nemesis’ surprise. “Yes. The XK 101. It was front page news until you hit the skies.”

“And the other one,” Miss Teschmacher added, “is zipping east over Oklahoma!”

“There’s another one?” Superman snapped, stepping in at Luthor, abruptly. The villain leapt back in defense.

With a pointed gesture, Luthor sent his moll and Otis, back around the corner. Straightening his jacket and taking a deep breath, he discarded the pointer and sat on the ottoman before the plush wingback chair. “Double Jeopardy, Superman. Even you, with your great speed, can’t stop both.” He spoke tauntingly: “While I can stop them with my detonator.”

Superman shot forward, snatched Luthor by a lapel, and yanked him into the air. He knew he could kill him right then and no one would blame him - especially no one in California. Picturing himself strangling the life out of the bald scoundrel, his heart pounded. “If you make yourself their judge and executioner,” he recalled Jor-El say, “the people you have come to guide will fear you.” He gritted his teeth. “Where is the detonator?”

Luthor shot a sudden glance back toward the desk.

Ha! You give yourself away, Luthor!

Superman dropped the monster back on his perch and scanned the desk. Nothing. He searched the wall beyond it. More nothing. "Okay, Luthor, is this just another one of . . . Ah!" His vision could penetrate everything around - except the ottoman beneath the villain's posterior.

Luthor's eyes bugged. "What are you looking at?"

"Did you really think you could hide it from me by encasing it in lead?" With a swing of his arm, Superman sent the bald man head-over-heels across the room. "I'll forge this into your prison bars!" he declared, reaching toward the ottoman.

"No!" Luthor shouted, crawling up off the floor. "Don't open that!"

With a grunt of disgust, the Man of Steel gripped the top of the ottoman and ripped it free.

A green blaze struck him in the face. He screamed as every cell in his body convulsed.

The fuel gauge teetered close to E. *This rented piece of junk sucks up gas like a black hole*, Lois thought, as she caught sight of the "Last Chance Service Station." Since the freeway before her apparently stretched to infinity, she decided to take the business at its word and pulled up to the pump.

A young, pimply-faced man stood to the side of the building, staring into the northeastern horizon. The embroidered work shirt suggested he was the pump jockey, but though the bell sounded as Lois ran over the hose, he did not budge an inch. The reporter rolled down her window. "Can I get some service here?"

An elderly man in an identical shirt hobbled out of the building and barked angrily at the kid: "Jonah!"

"What?"

"Move your butt and help the lady!"

"All right, for crying out loud. You don't have to bite my head off!"

"Don't make me have to!"

Grumbling, Jonah slumped up to Lois' window. "Yeah?"

"Don't you mean," the big-city woman said, irritated, "'How may I help you?'"

"Yeah," Jonah grunted, still oddly distracted by the horizon.

“Give me ten dollars worth,” she said.

Without a word, the attendant grabbed the nozzle from the pump and went to work. Shaking his head, the old man approached and spoke apologetically: “He’s my brother’s grandson. I hope you understand.”

“Sure . . . Phil,” she said, reading off his name patch. She handed him a ten-spot. “I am on the right road to get to Hoover Dam, right?”

“Yes, ma’am. Interstate Fifteen. Just about another hour’s drive.”

Good, she thought. Jimmy was meeting her at the dam at one o’clock. The interview with Chief Black Horse about the sudden sales of reservation land to the anonymous buyer had gone quickly. She had time to spare.

“Tell you what, I’ll get you a map.” Phil turned and hurried back to the building, barking over his shoulder: “Jonah, don’t you let that gas spill!”

“Yeah.”

Lois caught a look at Jonah in her side mirror. The slacker, leaning against the back end of the red sedan, held the nozzle in place with one hand while shielding his eyes from the midday sun with the other. He was still staring at the horizon. *What is that boy looking at?* she wondered, trying hard to follow his example through the filthy windshield. No good, but her curiosity was too much. She opened her door and stepped out. *There it is!* About two thumb widths above the distant mountains, a white, pencil-shaped object moved evenly through the sky. Considering the distance, it must have been moving fast.

Chapter Ten

“Kryptonite”

“I call it Kryptonite,” Luthor said, gleefully watching his red-caped enemy writhe on the floor. “A little souvenir from your old hometown. I spared no expense to make you feel right at home.”

Considering the incredible pain he had to be going through, the Kryptonian did not give up easily. Clawing at the polished floor, he desperately tried to escape the agonizing radiation. With a loud groan, he even forced himself stumbling to his feet.

I've got to give the big, alien lug some credit, Luthor thought, as he reached into the busted ottoman and lifted out the kryptonite. He had forged the glowing stone into a savage piece of jewelry, setting it in an iron ring attached to a chain. "You were great in your day," he said. "Yet, it just stands to reason, when it came time for you to cash in your chips, I'd be your banker." Coming up behind him, Luthor slipped the chain around Superman, wrapping him in it twice. The man in blue-and-red had not the strength to fight him off. "It's a matter of mind over muscle," Luthor explained, as he took from a pocket a padlock and key. "You look so good in this. I shouldn't want it to slip off."

"You don't . . .," Superman spoke, raspily, struggling to form the words, "you don't even care where . . . where the other missile is headed, do . . . do you?"

With a click, Luthor locked the chain into place and slipped the key into his jacket pocket. "Of course, I do," he said, casually leading his enemy to the ledge overlooking the flooded lower level. "It's headed straight for Hackensack, New Jersey." Nudging him ever so slightly, he sent Superman plunging into the pool, giggling as the chlorinated water swallowed the alien with a splash. "I have to leave you now. No hard feelings, I hope." He spun on his heels to discover his blond servant awaiting him with his smoking jacket and a cigar, her face wide open in shock.

"Lex," she said, anxiously. "My mother lives in Hackensack!"

He traded her his blazer for the smoking jacket. "Mine lives in Gary, Indiana. What's your point?"

"She's gonna die!"

"Oh, Miss Teschmacher . . .," Luthor laughed, snatching the cigar. "This sympathetic side of yours is unattractive." At the snap of a lighter, the stogy blazed. "But, that's all right, dear. We all have our faults, don't we? Mine is in California." A skip of pride in his step, Luthor trotted off to the control room, singing "California here I come, right back where I started from . . ."

Until kryptonite, he had never known pain. He had no experience. Not a pin prick. Not a paper cut. Now, his every cell gave its own lesson in torment. Prone to the elements, the water engulfed him - his eyes stinging from the chlorine - his gullet flooding - one horrifying ordeal adding to another. Soon he would add "death." And not just his own. The whole West Coast needed him.

He struggled, clawing at the water. Defying the weight of the chain, he grabbed for air. His face burst through the surface. Whipping the chlorine from his eyes, he gasped: "Help me!"

“Why should I?” came a faltering voice. Standing on the ledge above him was Luthor’s woman, clutching her master’s blazer. Even to his weakened and irritated eyes, her face was clearly strained with anguish.

He coughed and spat. “Millions will die . . .”

“My mother lives in Hackensack. You have to save her first,” Miss Teschmacher pleaded.

“The other missile . . . will strike . . . first,” he gurgled, his mouth flooding - his limbs numbing, growing heavier. He was going under, and he knew he would not be coming up again.

“Promise me! You never lie. Promise me!” she demanded.

“Yes, I prom--,” he blurted with his last breath, his face swallowed by the pool.

His agony gave way to coldness, and the water had him. *Millions will die*, he thought. *Millions will die. Jimmy will die. Lois will . . .*

I’m sorry, Lois. Forgive me. I wasn’t your Superman after all.

The water beside him exploded. A pair of arms embraced him - pulled him - dragged him to the marble stairs that dipped into the pool. Pushed up out of the water, he breathed again noisily. The blond woman, her wet hair swept back and her filmy dress clinging, brandished the key. She thrust it into the padlock. Turned it. She jerked at the chain . . . then stopped. Through drooping lids, Kal-El saw her ogle him. *What’s she waiting for?* A smile - a shy, school girl grin - slipped over her face. Gently touching fingertips to his cheek, Miss Teschmacher leaned in and, with warm breath, kissed him.

Then, she yanked at the chain - once - twice - three times, until the captive was finally free of his shackle. “Put it . . .” the Kryptonian groaned, “. . . put it back in the box.”

With a slosh, she leapt from the water, the poisonous device in hand, and charged up the steps.

He felt it immediately as the distance between him and the meteorite grew. Sensation returned to his arms and legs. Life pulsed again.

Miss Teschmacher shouted that the kryptonite was back in the box. Superman knew the moment it happened. Once the source was trapped again in lead, the effects of the radiation ceased altogether. His body again surged with power.

He sprang from the pool, and, in an instant, stood beside Miss Teschmacher. Seeing that the ottoman was closed tightly, he grabbed it up.

Curiosity demanded he take a moment. “Why did you kiss me before you removed the kryptonite?” he asked her.

The girlish smirk returned. “I didn’t think you’d let me later.”

Superman smiled back, like a parent whose naughty child suddenly did something cute. “Stand aside,” he said, and with a sweep of his arm, he shot up, debris flying as he burst through the ceiling.

His body spinning again, he drilled back through the layers of concrete, metal, and earth, until the city surrounded him. He stopped the spin but did not slow his ascent. Rocketing over the bay, he hurled the ottoman downward, saw the splash, and took off into the stratosphere.

Where atmosphere met vacuum, he halted and looked down at the Earth. From this vantage point he was like a scholar examining an animated globe. His powerful eyes saw the two missiles gaining on their targets. The eastward bound was just about to cross the Mississippi. The westward bound was already over southeastern California. *If I’m to keep my promise and save both coasts*, he worried, *I’ll have to be quick*.

He plunged.

Buildings rocked and the Gateway Arch shivered as a sonic boom, like none heard before, blasted the skies in the wake of a shooting figure that the people of St. Louis had only heard about.

“What’s that?” he heard someone below ask.

“That’s Superman,” came a reply.

“No duh. I mean that other thing.”

The other thing was the XK 101.

Superman dropped over the river. He positioned himself directly in the rocket’s path, taking on the readied stance of a running back about to catch a long bomb to the end zone - his muscles tightening, his teeth grinding. *Here comes!*

The Man of Steel caught nothing but wind - the wake of the missile as it swerved around him. *Dang it! The thing’s got some sort of avoidance system!* Taking off after it he realized he would have to come up behind, catch it like a greased pig.

Luthor slapped Otis’ hand away from the bowl of party mix. “Get your own,” he said, never

taking his eyes from the monitor. On the screen directly in front of him was a stolen transmission of the Army's tracking system. The screen displayed, transposed over a map of the country, the advance of the two XK 101 rockets. A red line illustrated the route of the missile headed for the Fault, and the blue line represented the one racing toward New Jersey. "ALERT", in bright orange lettering, flared in the upper right-hand corner. The warning had been flashing since the missiles had gone off course. Luthor's plan was going along perfectly, and it made the mastermind chuckle with glee. Doom was just around the corner and he was loving it.

Suddenly, he screamed a profanity.

"What's wrong, Mr. Loo-thor?" Otis asked.

What was happening? The blue line had stopped its progression to the right. It curved sharply around, twisting into a spiral. Below the map, the elevation readout jumped: 1000, 2000, 3000 feet . . . and more.

Could the Army have regained control? he reasoned, checking his control board. *No. The abort signal is still jammed. There's only one way . . .* He cursed again and leapt from his seat, his henchman scurrying after him.

The ottoman was gone and the floor wet. Luthor traced the water trail to his crumpled blazer on the ledge over the pool. He looked down.

"Miss Teschmaaaaacherrrrr!"

Chapter Eleven

"A Job for Superman"

Superman pushed with all his Kryptonian might, his hands gripping the rim of the rocket's afterburner, the fiery emission blasting in his face. The Earth's blue aura fell behind. Space opened up as he raced past the orbit of the moon. He released the missile, letting it sail into the black.

The missile exploded. A shockwave smacked him, toppling him head-over-heels back toward the Earth. He stabilized himself.

What's that?

At the point of the explosion - thousands of miles away - a bluish glob, a miniature nebula, glowed and faded. Among the CrystalMind's multitude of lessons there was something about such an effect, but he did not have the time to sort through them. He dove back toward the Earth, only to see the nuclear plume. The other XK 101 had made its target.

I'm coming! Superman shot into the atmosphere, plunging over California. Though the shifting tectonic plates were sending surges hundreds of miles in all directions, he first had to contain the fallout. His teeth gnashing, he arched his back, curving his form into a human paring knife. Swooping, he circled the mushroom cloud once, then again and again - faster and faster - zigzagging around the edge - warping the atmosphere and compressing the plume into a dark pillar. Spinning again like a top, he dove down the center of the column, dragging the smoke and ash with him into the fault. He bored past the crust, deeper and deeper - puncturing the molten core and drawing the nuclear debris into the center of the Earth.

Engulfed in magma, he made an U-turn and drilled another shaft back up to the fault, lava percolating up behind him. He broke into the air, halted, and, for a moment watched the molten rock fill the gash in the Earth like builder's caulking.

Just one last step, he knew, and plummeted back into the fault, rocketing through the rising lava and tunneling straight to San Francisco Bay. Piercing the bay floor, he slowed and rose out of the water. He peered down with his mighty vision and smiled, satisfied, as the cool water seeped rapidly down the subterranean canal. *It'll cool the magma and heal the fault*, he thought, happily. *Thank Rao for Jor-El, a little ingenuity, and my ninth grade science class, where he made the baking soda volcano!*

Around him the city was shaking. The crustal plates were no longer shifting, but the tremors had not yet stopped. The Golden Gate bridge swayed fiercely. Automobiles screeched, braked, and crashed. A truck swerved into a school bus, thrusting it through the railing. Onboard, the children screamed as the bus teetered.

Another job for Superman!

"What on Earth?" Lois blurted, as the car jolted. She knew California was famous for its earthquakes, but she was already crossing the border into southern Nevada. *I didn't know they had them this far east.*

A telephone pole toppled in front of her. She swerved, avoiding lashing powerlines, and skidded on the dusty shoulder. Twisting the steering wheel hard, she spun back onto the pavement - steadied, and drove on - the ground still bucking beneath her. *What is this? The end of the freakin' world?*

The school bus saved and the bridge settled, Superman rose high, scanning the land, looking for where he was most needed. The shockwave, so intense that it whip-cracked through the crust to the distant Colorado River, endangered the Hoover Dam. A network of cracks ripped through the structure's sloping face.

Something shot by overhead. A figure soaring eastward. Not pencil-shaped this time, but the recognizable figure of a man in red-and-blue. "Superman!" Lois called out, anxiously leaning into her steering wheel and peering through the windshield.

The Caped Wonder, it appeared, did not hear, and kept to his path.

Swooping far overhead, Superman saw that the personnel had already evacuated the dam, swarming onto the connecting roads along the crest of Black Canyon. But one person atop the structure was failing to escape. Apparently, taking pictures was too important to save his own life. *Seems he doesn't have the common sense to temper Perry's commandment of getting the news at any price*, the Kryptonian thought, as he dove.

The roadway cracking and surging at his feet, Jimmy Olsen stumbled and fell against the side railing. Below was a 700-foot drop to rushing water. The railing shattered and the boy slipped. With desperate fingers he clawed at the crumbling concrete, screaming. His hands gave way.

"Mama!"

Superman caught him in an arm. "Will I do?"

Below, the dam's interlocking blocks of concrete burst. Lake Mead broke free, roaring into the

canyon, swelling the river, and tearing its way through rock and earth.

Struggling with the wheel, Lois searched all around her - in her mirrors, twisting her head every-which-way to peer over her shoulders. But there was nothing. No one. Not a soul. Not a shack. Not a car. All she saw was desert, desert, and more desert.

CLUNK! The car dropped to the left, grinding, the underside dragging on the crumbling pavement.

“What now?”

Her mouth gaped as she saw the jagged rent tearing through the pavement - splitting the highway like a zipper, opening into a deep gouge. The car shifted again, dropping on its side. Sliding down with violent jerks. She was being swallowed alive!

Unlatching her seatbelt with one hand, she rolled down her window with the other. “Help! Help!” she screamed, as she pried her hips past the steering column, struggling to climb out.

The car lunged downward, shaking her grip. She dropped. “Superman!” she screamed, hitting the passenger side door. Crumbling dirt and rock from the walls of the fissure, poured into her face. Lois knocked it away with her hands, but it came harder and faster.

Seeing the crowd on the northern side of the canyon, Superman set Jimmy down with them and rocketed out after the wave, whizzing past it - gaining time to prepare a trap. Miles down, huge, jagged monoliths jutted upward on either side of the canyon. They were just what he needed. Knotting his fists, he shot forward, ramming a butte. It burst into a thousand boulders that tumbled and tumbled down the canyon wall into the gap. The giant gravel plugged the river, but looking back he could see that it was not enough to hold the onrush. Another thirty miles down the Colorado, the town of Cottonwood Cove, teeming with people, would not settle for a half-done job. He shot across the canyon and collided with another stone tower. The debris poured into the canyon. Still not enough. He rammed away at the ridges, pulverizing them and bringing down more debris. The dyke grew higher and higher, racing the explosion of water until with an enormous splash, the flood crashed - and went no farther. The water undulated and settled.

Cottonwood Cove was safe, Hoover Dam was no more, and Lake Mead stretched another twelve miles.

Setting down on a high peak of the Black Mountains, Kal-El gazed around him. As he sighed, he

felt the last of the tremors fade beneath his feet. Surely, there were casualties, even fatalities, but more in the dozens than the millions. He nodded, knowing he could be gratified with a job well done. The violence was over. All was calm. All was silent.

Yet something was wrong. He listened. Thousands upon thousands of sounds. Big ones. Little ones. Voices. Machines. Animals. Birds. Insects. These were the sounds of peace. The sounds that signify all is right. But something was wrong. Very, very wrong.

Images popped from the archives of his mind: A broken porch step, a shattered glass of lemonade. The terror of memory. It disturbed him at a depth not felt since his youth. No sound could cause such distress. Only the silence.

A patter he had come to count on was gone. A rhythm that was new but essential. A drumming that kept time lovingly in the back of his mind. Now it was gone and tore him in a way kryptonite could never do.

Lois!

He shot straight up. She had to be close. Jimmy was. So must she. The Kryptonian left no stone unscanned. He could not - he would not - miss her.

And he did not. Miles away, swallowed by a ragged tear over the desert and through the highway, a car laid sideways, sandwiched in crumbling earth. Lois lied still within, encased in packed debris. She was a fossil-to-be.

Superman shot forward. Eternity-like seconds later, he smacked down on the slashed pavement, reached in the crevice, gripped the chassis, and lifted out the car. His breath agitated, he yanked off the door and, scooping his hands at blinding speed, dug until the dark-haired woman fell into his arms.

No.

It was true. His ears had not deceived him. His sight, his touch confirmed the silence.

No!

Lois was dead.

Chapter Twelve

“Savior”

He sets her down on the dusty road, shaking his head in desperate rage.

“NO!”

Kal-El fires himself off into the sky, arcing, knotted fists leading him. Leaving the blue canopy behind, he whips around the planet in mere seconds - then again, then again - building velocity.

He feels it. The Universe warps around him as his orbits take milliseconds. Reaching the ultimate speed, time slows . . . slows . . . until finally, theory proves itself, as at a point, racing in line with light itself, the particles hang beside him. All existence an exhausting array of molecules, unmoving. A quantum still life. His own body melds with the magic. Yet, it will not absorb his fury.

He accelerates, gathering his fragments, hurling past reality and making time his slave.

“You cannot have her!” he commands. “You will give her back to me!”

Humbled, time acquiesces. The minutes tick backward.

He slows and dives, reentering the Earth’s bubble. Seeing the XK 101 rockets just now launching, he claps his hands in victory and fires off, surpassing the westward-bound missile without a thought.

There. Chugging along the long stretch of interstate is her red sedan, her death trap.

He lands in its path. It screeches to a halt. The driver’s side door opens and the woman jumps out. “Superman!” she exclaims. “What are you doing--?”

He whips her up in his arms and launches again - Up . . . up . . . and away from the danger, away into the solace of the stratosphere.

Her head nestles at his chest. Her eyes raise to gaze at him. “I love you,” she says.

“I love you, too,” he answers, putting his lips to hers.

“Look at what you have done?”

Shimmering in the faint blue haze against the black of space, stands Jor-El, adorned in his white administrative robe. His expression grave, he points downward. His son sees the two black clouds billowing up on opposing coasts. He sees the ground tremble, crumbling into the oceans.

“You have condemned them,” Jor-El says. “You have judged them unworthy.”

“No, I haven’t,” exclaims Kal-El.

“You have placed her above them and, therefore, declared all the others inferior. They are not as deserving of your protection.”

“You don’t understand--”

“Son, you have taken the first step to godhood. Judging their worth. What did those millions do to deserve your indifference?”

“No, it was Luthor. He--”

“For the sake of one, you doomed them. You chose to turn the Universe inside-out so that you could have her. What whim will you fulfill next?”

Exasperated, Kal-El caressed the woman in his arms. “How can you deny me her?”

“How can you deny them their lives?”

Kal-El hears the screams upon screams upon screams, a chorus of terror, rising to meet his powerful hearing. With eyes glutted by tears, he examines the destroyed lands, zooming closer and closer, until he sees the bodies. Some are writhing. Some are still.

Among them one still stands. A man, his black hair tasseled by the nuclear wind, looks up at Kal-El.
It is Clark.

He speaks: “They are me.”

“NO!”

Superman screamed with every bit of rage, frustration, and self-pity he could release. His red-booted toe had dangled over that oh-so-thin line between being the Guardian of Earth and being a fool with powers far beyond those of mortal men. Yet, he had drawn it back and now stood firm. He was Superman still.

The woman, who had named him, lying prone in the dust at his feet would not have had it any other way, he knew. She would never have wanted others to die so she could live. *How she would have hated me!*

He knelt beside Lois and gently unblocked her mouth and throat with his fingers. Lying her body flat, he placed the butt of one hand over her chest. Eyes closed tightly, he focused his

mind, gauged his strength. *Start.* With a minute thump, he sent a precise shockwave through her rib cage. The heart responded, but not with a beat. *Start, I said!* He thumped his hand again. *Ahhh . . . There. There it is! Praise Rao, there it is!* Putting his mouth over hers, he puffed air into her lungs - once, twice, then she breathed. Shallow, but she breathed.

Sweeping her up, he snuggled her to his chest. His aura would sustain her.

Superman sprang into the air.

Epilogue

Leaning tightly over his control board, Luthor watched closely the activity on the screen before him. The fingers of his right hand danced playfully in midair over a certain red knob. The monitor displayed the dungeon chamber that had two entrances: one that led straight down from the train station toilet, and the other through an iron sliding door. The latter intended only for a special pair. Miss Teschmacher, her blond locks mussed and her chiffon dress torn, lay shaken on the floor. Only minutes earlier, Otis, fulfilling his master's command, dropped the captured woman through the trap door.

Luthor licked his lips and giggled in a way that would have frightened a hyena. He disturbed even Otis, who had experienced every bizarre turn of the mastermind's moods. The henchman kept to the doorway and gnawed agitatedly at his fingernails. "Please, Mr. Loo-thor," he said. "You're just gonna scare her, right?"

The villain did not look away from the scene. "Scare her? Yes. Just? No!" He yanked the microphone before him: "Hi there, Sweetie." The woman was just realizing what had happened. She looked around. "It's just me," he said. *Yes, Miss Teschmacher. Now you know where you are, don't you?* She jumped up and glared into the camera. Luthor could read her lips well: Cries of "Help me!" and "Don't do this!" He let his dancing fingers fall on the knob. "You were naughty, Miss Teschmacher. Very naughty. So naughty, in fact, that now you're dragon-bait." He turned the knob. On the monitor he saw the iron door creep open. Miss Teschmacher dropped to her knees, pleading. It just made him chuckle. "You blond idiot, did you really think that you could get--"

Luthor choked on what was left of his sentence as the death chamber's ceiling exploded and a powerful figure in red-and-blue plunged through. He leapt up from his seat. "Abandon ship!" he shouted at Otis.

"What?"

"Run for it!"

Luthor pushed his confused henchman through the door, rattling off the details of their emergency evacuation plan. “. . . while I get the medical kit you ready the jet packs. Then, we’ll--!”

“Mr. Loo-thor!” Otis hooted, facing dozens of gun barrels. A swarm of police officers filled Luthor’s lair, their weapons aimed.

Standing erect, Luthor pushed Otis aside, and with a huff set himself to play a scene he had prepared for years to play - and play brilliantly: “The Capture of The Great Criminal Genius!”

The blond woman safe, Superman set her down on the sewer catwalk. Waiting before the blasted hole at the end stood a woman in a beige pantsuit, at her side two uniformed officers. Her jacket held open as she rested her hands on her hips exposed the gold badge attached to her waistband. “This way, Miss Teschmacher,” Superman said. “Captain Sawyer will be taking--”

“But - but - but . . .” she sputtered, “I saved your life!”

“And forced me into a deal that threatened millions,” he explained.

“But I . . . I had to protect my muuuuuherrrrr!” Miss Teschmacher whined, her eyes welling and her mouth twisting into a slobbering figure eight.

A place in him softened for her. He had himself stepped up to that precipice and glared down. Though not taking the leap, he understood the urge. “I’m not your judge,” he said. “But if the authorities will listen, I’ll put in a good word for you.”

The woman’s near hysterical expression drooped into a childish pout, then, rose into a lascivious leer. “How about that kiss? That was something, huh?”

To that the Man of Steel could only grin. He gestured to the captain, and she and her officers stepped forward, taking Miss Teschmacher into custody.

“We have Luthor,” Captain Sawyer told him, as she applied handcuffs.

Superman stepped into the lair. Police were everywhere. They searched through every nook-and-cranny for evidence. It came in abundance. He was just in time to see a group of officers find the trigger that drew back a wall revealing stacks upon stacks of gold bars. *The Planet’s going to have a field day with this!* Down in the living area, in the very spot where Luthor had ambushed Superman, the villain, Otis humbly at his side, was being Mirandized: “. . . anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of--”

“I know my rights!” Luthor broke in. “I can quote the Supreme Court decision backwards and forwards in thirty-seven different languages!”

“Okie Doke,” said the brown-suited detective reading him his rights. He turned to the officer next to him taking notes: “Record that he has declined the reading of his--”

“I put you on notice!” Luthor bellowed.

“You’re on notice, people!” Otis hooted.

“That no prison walls will hold me! I shall return to--!”

“Tell it to the boys in your cell block, Luthor,” the detective barked. “Take him away, men!”

Luthor continued his tirade as a half dozen officers propelled him and Otis out - “I shall return to bring terror to this nation. Then . . . I’m going after Australia!” All the time the henchman cheered “No walls! No walls! No walls!” until his champion told him to shut up. Superman watched with a satisfied smile.

The man in the brown suit walked up to the hero and extended a friendly hand. “Hello, Superman, my name is--”

With a respectful tilt of his head, Kal-El shook his hand. “Inspector Henderson, I presume.”

The mature, dignified policeman regarded him with restrained awe. “We all owe you a debt of gratitude.”

“Not at all. We’re all in this together.”

“Fighting for ‘Truth, Justice, and the American Way’?”

Superman nodded, lowering his eyes, flattered to be quoted. He glanced up and saw the hole in the ceiling that had been his earlier exit. “I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other soon.” With a wave and a blur, he was gone.

Rising high in the sky, he cruised over the nation. In minutes, he was back over Nevada, hovering above Boulder City General Hospital. *How is she doing?* He peered into her room, where Lois lied in her bed comfortably. Though still hooked up to tubes and wires, the oxygen mask that had once covered her nose and mouth was set aside. The EKG beeped a happy rhythm. Jimmy Olsen sat next to her and read the cards from the flower arrangements on her nightstand.

“ ‘ . . . Best Wishes, Your Friend, Superman’ ,” Jimmy read, as the Man of Steel listened in.

“Do you think,” Lois said, weakly but cheerfully, “he sends flowers to everyone he saves?”

“I don’t think so,” the boy chuckled, plucking another card. “This one says ‘Keep up that spirit. We need you. Signed, Clark’.”

“That’s sweet. It’s too bad he hasn’t got to meet Superman yet. They’d really like each--”

“I think he really cares for you, Miss Lane.”

“Clark? Of course he does.”

“No. I mean Superman.”

Lois sighed. “Superman likes everybody, Jimmy. But . . . who knows, maybe one of these days . . . if he’s lucky.” She laughed. Jimmy laughed. Kal-El did not. Lois could not have realized, even if the man were standing right at her side, how much her jest would stab at his very center.

Nor would she have known that as he soared up over the Earth, he would take the thought and set it in that precious place where the heart meets the mind and fantasy faces reality. He must be who he must be. He must see everyone who walks the planet as friend and family, loving and protecting them with the same charity. Should he forget, Clark will always remind him.

Who am I?

He is Ma and Pa’s boy. The last son of Krypton. The Guardian of Earth.

Thank you, Lois.

They call him SUPERMAN.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all the artists, writers, and fans who have contributed to the legend of Superman. To one extent or another, they have all added to the content of this work. Though I would not list them all - there are far too many to do so - I would like to mention several:

Jackson Gillis, writer of many of the finest episodes of TV’s “The Adventures of Superman”;

Tom Mankiewicz, who took a questionable screenplay and pulled it together into something special;

Jim Bowers, whose laboriously-crafted “Super” Extended Version of S:TM was my primary reference;

Gandalf, founder of “Superman Cinema”, the ultimate tribute to the Man of Steel’s film career;

And YOU, for taking time to read it.

I would enjoy hearing any comments you may have.

Please e-mail me at <fearsolomongrundy@yahoo.com>